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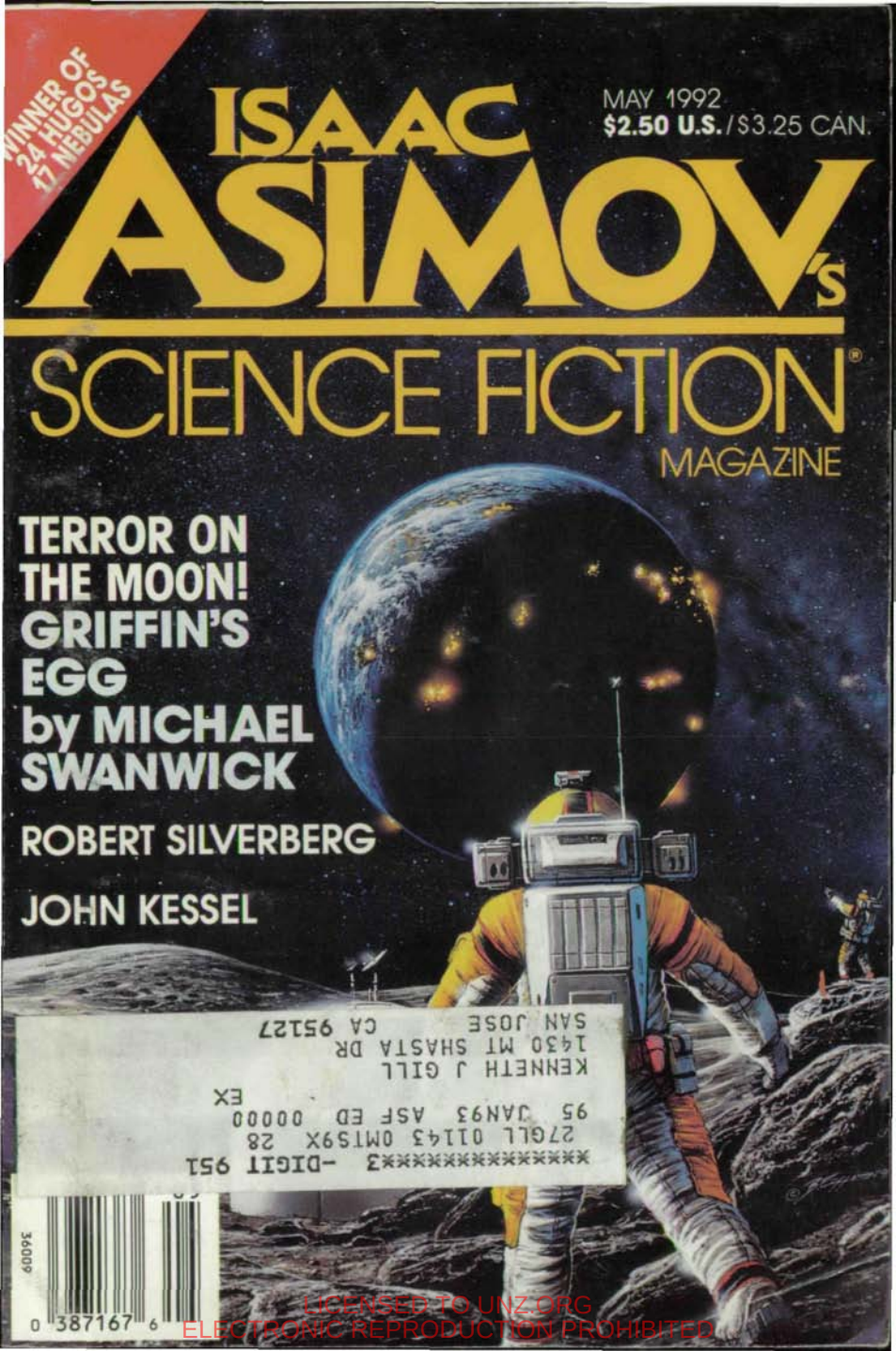

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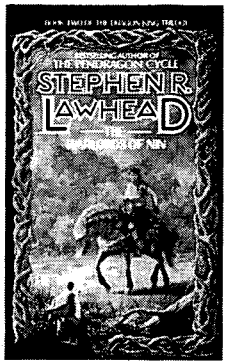

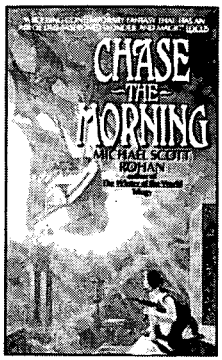

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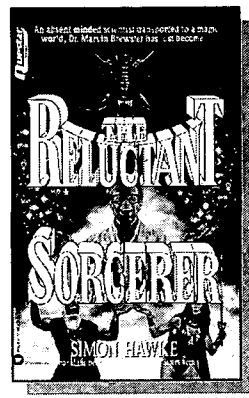

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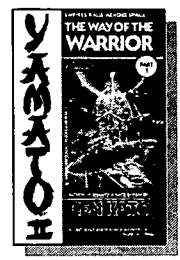
...And when you see me around, ask me how Greg Bear can possibly follow up the destruction of Earth (which is exactly what he does in *Anvil of Stars*).

ALSO THIS MONTH:



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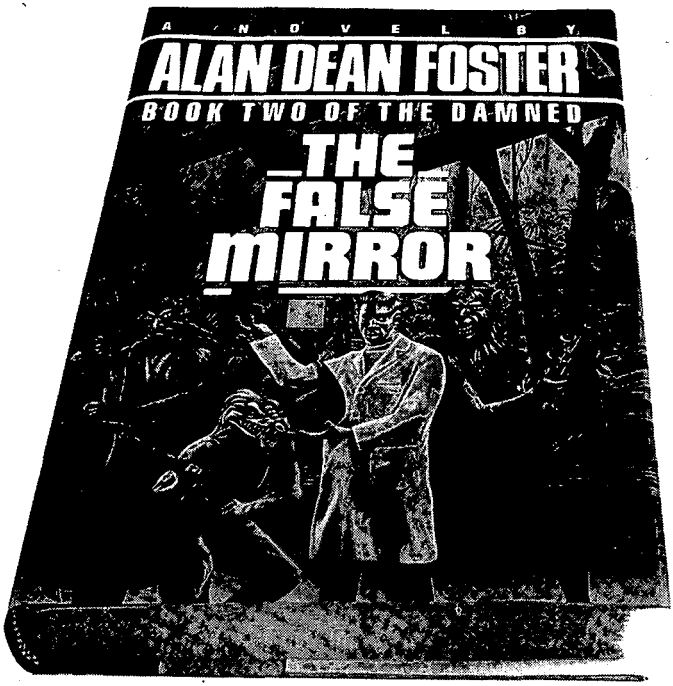

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April 28, 1992

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

WHINING

Sometimes I miss something interesting by following Lester del Rey's rule. Once when we met and I was obviously chagrined, he asked me what was wrong, and I answered curtly, "Lousy review."

He said, "Isaac, why do you let your blood pressure soar at these things? It's bad for your health. Now, when I read a review or any comments on anything I write, then, at the first nasty adjective, I throw the damned thing away."

I've been trying to do that ever since.

The next story is, I am sure, one I have already told, but I like it so I'll repeat it. Besides, not everyone reads all my editorials and it may be new to them. So, I will tell it again for their sake.

I came to my club for luncheon once a couple of years ago and there was smoke coming out of my ears. The club members are, for some reason, very concerned with my welfare so pretty soon I had a small crowd about me asking me what was wrong.

I told them. I had received a review so wrong-headed, so incredibly jejune that I could not endure it. Simply couldn't. One of the fellows said to me, "Now, Asimov, I have a little card that will cheer you up," and he presented it to me.

It said, "Your frank criticism is greatly appreciated. F--- you very much." Except there were no dashes. They spelled out the word clearly. I crowed with delight and when I had finished laughing, I handed the card back and said, "Thank you for showing it to me. It did make me feel better."

"Keep it," said my friend. "You need it a lot more than I do."

And I still have it. It's a little dog-eared by now but I still have it, and it cheers me up every time I look at it.

Sometimes I can take a little criticism without its blistering the hide off me.

I was talking to my lovely daughter, Robyn, on the phone when I noticed a cockroach (or something) crawling across the floor. I am dreadfully afraid of bugs so when I see something like that, my usual task is to call my dear wife, Janet, at the top of my lungs. She comes in and takes care of the monster.

This time, however, I did not want to interrupt the phone call so,

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taking my life in my hands, I stood up and went over to the thing and went stamp, stamp, stamp, and he was dead. I couldn't help boasting about it to Robyn.

She listened in disbelief. "You didn't scream?"

"No."

"You didn't call for Janet?"

"No."

"Oh, good for you, Daddy." (I called in Janet immediately afterward, though, and had her dispose of the body.)

Naturally, I was gratified at Robyn's approval and it was only after a while, as I thought about the matter, that it struck me there may have been a touch of sarcasm in her words, just a trace of irony.

I didn't like it and I would have confronted her with the matter but what was the use? I knew exactly what she would say. She would say, 1) I never said it.

2) If I said it, it was meant seriously. No funny stuff.

And 3) "I love you, Daddy."

What can you do against reasoning like that? So I let it go and never mentioned it again until this editorial came to be written.

Which brings me back to the letter I missed because of following the Lester del Rey rule.

The trouble is I don't read material a word at a time so I can't really dump it at the first unpleasant word. Instead, I tend to read a paragraph at a time, so that I often get a number of unpleasant words before dumping it.

I gathered that the author of the

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letter thought, judging from the very first paragraph, that my editorials were going rapidly downhill and that I had been reduced to *whining*. Golly, that hurt. I don't whine, I complain. Those are two different things.

The trouble is that readers don't understand what a writer's life is like. (Never mind if he is old and sick and tired as I am.)

Just a couple of weeks ago I got about fifty letters from two different schools. Each letter was scribbled in pencil and went through the same familiar rites. Each gave his, or her, name, the school he or she attended. Each one loved my writing (hah!) but never named a specific story. And each one ended by asking for my autograph, if I were lucky. Otherwise they asked for an autographed photograph of my sweet face.

It's a cinch I'm not going to sign fifty autographs (even if I were strong and well) when I know that those autographs will be kept for a day or so and then thrown away.

How do all the kids simultaneously write virtually identical letters?

Easy. There are teachers, damn their ornery hides, who get the brilliant idea of telling their students, "I want you all to write to Isaac Asimov. He's just sitting at home with nothing to do and what could possibly give him any pleasure other than signing autographs for each of you."

I'm forced to disappoint them all. I don't sign a single autograph. This may make me seem like a curmudgeon, but that's what I want to seem like at this time of my life. I keep telling myself that if I never sign an autograph, such letters will stop coming. Alas, I'm quite wrong there.

Here's another doozy. A fellow from some foreign country wrote to tell me that he had "heard" that I had written over four hundred books. Well, that's great. Could I please send him a list of all of them? No, I couldn't and I didn't. In fact, what he got from me was a shriek. How can anyone possibly imagine that I would sit down and type 477 titles just for his pleasure?

In fact, one gentleman, a rabbi, I believe, wrote to attempt to match books with me. He had written more books than I had and he sent me a list. They were all, as nearly as I could make out, Jewish tracts of one sort or another. Well, if he wanted a race he wasn't going to get one from me.

When I was young and strong, I used to boast that I answered all my fan mail. That was a terrible, horrible mistake, especially after it was repeated in an article on me in *Reader's Digest*.

From then on I was inundated by a snowdrift of mail, all of which started, "I understand you answer all your fan mail." There would follow a mass of trivia that I had no heart to answer. I finally gave up, began answering some of the mail only and now I answer none of it.

And yet just yesterday I got an

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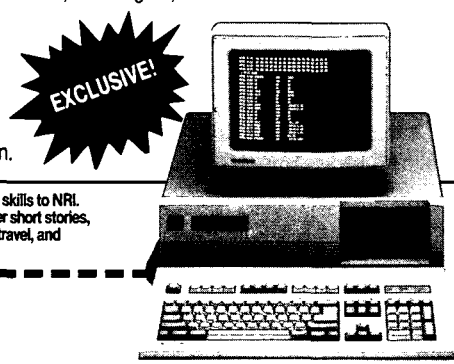

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absolutely furious letter from a reader who had heard I answered all my mail and he had sent me a letter and I had never answered it. I didn't answer that one, either.

Here's another source of annoyance. I am constantly being asked to go to Chattanooga or Tuscaloosa in order to give a talk. There's never any mention of money (not that I would go to such places for a million dollars) although the more generous ones offer to pay my travel expenses.

In the old days, I used to write polite letters explaining that I do not travel, but I got awfully tired doing that. Nowadays I tell myself that if some poor benighted soul doesn't know I don't travel then to hell with them. I don't answer.

Sometimes it does ache a little when they offer me a plaque or a scroll or some sort of commendation, but I suppress it. I have received enough plaques and scrolls and all the rest of the rigmarole to last anyone a lifetime. I don't need any more.

Don't get me wrong; I do answer my business mail. Reluctantly, but I answer. There should be some rule that governs the way I treat my mail, and I sometimes spend some time thinking up what it might be. The closest I come to something reasonable is this.

If a letter-writer wants something from me; if a reader is only getting pleasure by demanding my time, I won't answer. If he enjoys writing letters like that let the enjoyment be his reward.

I remember once Harlan Ellison giving a two-hour talk all about how readers attempt to exploit him. (He's unexploitable.) He said when someone sends him a book to sign, he doesn't. He simply adds it to his library.

I protested. I said, "Harlan, those guys are buying your books. How can you treat them that way?"

He said, "Isaac, I write a book and presumably they get pleasure from it. Very well. They've read the book and they've enjoyed it. That's obviously all I owe them. We're even. They have no right to ask for anything else. They would be furious if I claimed a bonus for everything they wanted out of me."

I still protested, but I've gotten old and tired and have decided he is right.

There you have a list of *some* of my complaints. I am not whining, I am complaining, and I think I have a right to complain. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:
Re: Arthur C. Clarke's letter (August 1991) re my story "Two Bad Dogs." Thanks for including a photo of Pixie. I haven't seen a chihuahua for so many years (wonder why) that I didn't realize the breed still existed. Anyhow, I get Mr. Clarke's point, my apologies to toy poodles, you guys ain't so bad.

As for preempting Mr. Clarke's thriller novel about a were-chihuahua, that would have been a bad idea for him. Might have tarnished his image as a serious scientific writer. He needs to write things that could really happen. How 'bout enormous spaceships full of super-intelligent aliens tooling around the universe faster than the speed of light? It's worked before. Why take chances?

Ronald Anthony Cross
Santa Monica, CA

Good old Arthur has a very keen sense of humor. I am quite positive that nothing in your letter will be found offensive by him. (You can also say funny things about me—but some writers are more sensitive, so be careful.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor;

Having been treated like something less than human by some of the slick magazine fiction editors, I applaud your editorial in the August issue of your magazine. It must take a big ego—or a very frightened one—to try to denigrate a man of your mental ability. As someone starting a second life, and starting small, I am glad there are people like you who have gone before. Your editorial shows us that we all have the right to try.

I have found that the literary, or small, magazine editors who can pay in copies and/or a few dollars are the most sympathetic and encouraging.

I don't think it's the time factor either. All editors must have to work at a frantic pace.

I think it all comes down to Power. When the Power is taken away the editor is suddenly the same size as the rest of us.

Yours truly,

Esther J. Holt
Brockway, PA

I'm sure that eventually you will sell your stories. It took me (me) *three years before I began to sell regularly.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Having just read Kit Reed's

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"River" in the September issue of *IAsfm*, I picked up the latest issue of the U.S. Trademark Association's newsletter and found the enclosed item about Samsung's new Scoot-About Home Service Robot which is "capable of sensing an intruder's movement and body heat and sounding an alarm," and can perform baby-monitoring and hospital notification functions. I'm not sure *déjà vu* is the correct description of the feeling, but it's an uncomfortable one.

It must be getting harder for SF authors to keep ahead of the times, or apart from them, with technology moving so rapidly.

Thanks for your part in producing a fine magazine. In this issue I especially enjoyed "River" and also "The Gallery of His Dreams" by Rusch.

Very truly yours,

Walter C. Farley
Arlington, VA

Actually, I've never found it hard to stay a little bit ahead of science. After all, though I'm considered a prime writer of "hard" science fiction, think about my stories and ask yourself how much I depend on technology. The Foundation stories, for instance, are about psychology and politics.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I recently bought your autobiography *In Memory Yet Green*. But, you see, I have a problem. I only bought the first volume and cannot find the second! How mean of you, sir! Leaving poor me high-and-dry in the middle of your life! How am I supposed to know how it comes out now? Do you take over the country in a coup and close down every airport? Or do you get kidnapped by illiterate aliens and forced to read the entire *2001* to them? I suggest next time you either make your life shorter or take out all the big words, like "autobiography" and "science fiction."

Your devoted fan,

William Mathieson
Studio City, PA

PS: I give your magazine ten thumbs up.

I'm sorry, old boy, but books do go out of print even when they are as wonderful as the ones I write. All I can suggest is that you haunt the second-hand bookstores (assuming that anyone is fool enough to discard one of my books.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have no complaints about the quality of the stories or articles in your magazine, if I did I wouldn't subscribe; however, I do have a comment on the letter by Ms. Singer in the November '91 issue. She complains that fantasy tends to make writers lazy. You agreed and then implied that fantasy was simplistic. I disagree.

As a fan of science fiction *and* fantasy I'd like to make a few comments about both. SF certainly may be harder to write because so much research and thought is involved to follow known and proven scientific evidence. But this does not make it better written or more enjoyable than fantasy. Having read both genres I've found few SF

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stories to be any more than tedious, because of all the science theories and probable proofs crammed into poor writing styles. These stories are often done with even poorer mechanical skills, and less than believable situations, characterization, and new societal possibilities. However, the fantasy I've read is free to concentrate on making a new world, situation, or society true to itself and its characters, which makes it believable. Of course both genres have exceptions like the fantasy "epics" that follow some idiotic Harlequin romance formula, and the SF that is actually in story form.

I have no personal preference between the two genres, liking both for different reasons, but I've found that stories which employ elements from both genres are better written, and intensely more enjoyable than the hard core SF or the wizard's magic sword type fantasy. Herbert's *Dune*, McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern,* Godwin's *Masters of Solitude,* Clarke's *Childhood's End,* and Bradley's *Darkover* stories are masterful examples of excellent writing that fall on the boundary line between genres.

Now for the point of this endless personal opinion. If more writers of both SF and fantasy would quit complaining about who works harder, is smarter, less lazy, and more productive than the other, and actually *work* on improving writing styles, mechanical skills, character, and believability, readers might actually want to read their stories, and maybe even consider them *Literature.*

Jill Ingram
Elk Ridge, UT

Much of what you say makes very good sense and I agree. Even though I couldn't write fantasy to save my life, I can appreciate the good stuff in the field. Though to tell you the truth, I am a little tired of the endless Tolkien imitations.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

Although I have written to the Good Doctor once before concerning some of his writings, this is the first time I have felt compelled to write concerning one of your magazine's stories. I refer to R. Garcia y Robertson's novella, "By The Time We Got To Gaugamela." The story was excellent in every aspect but one; namely how Jake was able to survive, let alone keep his job. It seems that Peg, his co-worker cum paramour, has a stronger survivability factor than he does.

Such trivialities as how Madyas was able to smuggle a weapon in his luggage can be overlooked as a minor necessity for plot strength, but no matter how you examine it, Jake is a bumbler. Perhaps his survival forte is to attach himself to a strongly survivable partner, including Sauromata.

In line with this, perhaps Sauromata could be recruited as an employee of Time Tours Unlimited. After all, she seemed to show a resistance to the much touted, terrible disease of Culture Shock. And what better way to have an expert on an era than to hire one from that period? And (hint—hint) perhaps we could see a series of TTU episodes. It works for Janet Kagan and her *Mirabile* series, and she doesn't have a patent on the idea.

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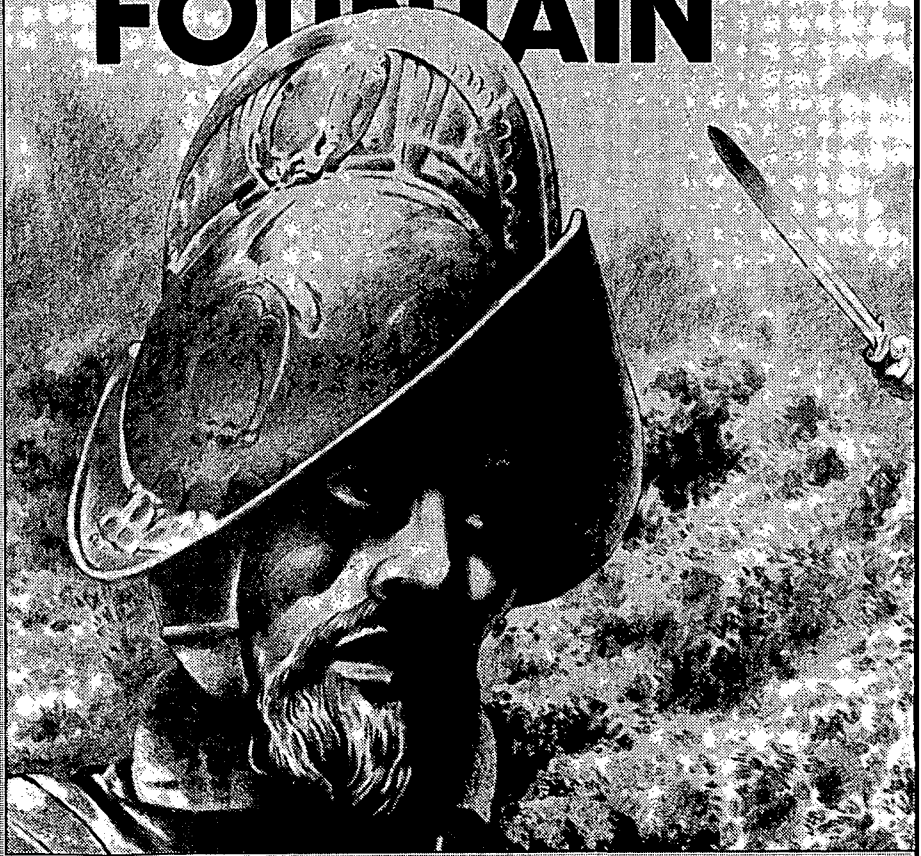
Robert Silverberg

LOOKING FOR THE FOUNTAIN



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(And I suspect she wouldn't want one.)
Cordially yours,

Brad Levy
1300 Shrine Road Box 156
Springfield, OH 45504

Well, you see we have no trouble in making a female character the strong one in a story. It just comes from not being male chauvinist pigs.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov,

I've just finished reading, with great pleasure, Connie Willis's "Jack" in the October issue. Growing up in London in the fifties surrounded by bomb sites, with parents who'd gone through the Blitz, I almost feel as if I experienced the war myself. Ms. Willis's story, and her earlier "Fire Watch," brought it all alive for me with a fascinating vividness.

I find I must point out one little incongruity though. For the most part her use of the language is faultless, and I'm especially glad she decided against rendering Cockney accents with dropped H's and peppering us with the resultant profusion of apostrophes. But a couple of Americanisms crept in.

"Candy" might have been used occasionally, though it was nearly always "sweets" or "sweeties," and I suppose "automobile" instead of "car" could've been heard once in a while. But "*gotten*," never. There's no such word in British English. It's just "got," both present and past tense.

Perhaps I can mitigate my nit-pickiness with a little story that I believe was told by Eleanor Roosevelt. An Englishman had been staying with her and the President for an extended visit, and during it had quite fallen in love with the, to him *foreign,* term of "gotten." When it was time to return to his wife in London he wired ahead for tickets to a show he knew she wanted to see, then sent his wife a telegram which read "Have gotten tickets to [Performance]. Will meet you there straight from boat."

His wife did indeed meet him there on his return, but with eight friends.

Thanks for an absolutely spiffing yarn,

David Westwood
Santa Monica, CA

I like to think that I can get the point of any joke without undue trouble. (After all, I am also a professional raconteur.) But I did puzzle over your final joke before I realized that "gotten" could be read as "got ten." And then I laughed.

—Isaac Asimov

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art: Bob Walters

While "Looking for the Fountain," Ponce de Léon discovers a mysterious tribe of Indians transformed by a *much* earlier encounter with Europeans...

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My name is Francisco de Ortega and by the grace of God I am eighty-nine years old and I have seen many a strange thing in my time, but nothing so strange as the Indian folk of the island called Florida, whose great dream it is to free the Holy Land from the Saracen conquerors that profane it.

It was fifty years ago that I encountered these marvelous people, when I sailed with his excellency the illustrious Don Juan Ponce de León on his famous and disastrous voyage in quest of what is wrongly called the Fountain of Youth. It was not a Fountain of Youth at all that he sought, but a Fountain of Manly Strength, which is somewhat a different thing. Trust me: I was there, I saw and heard everything, I was by Don Juan Ponce's side when his fate overtook him. I know the complete truth of this endeavor and I mean to set it all down now so there will be no doubt; for I alone survive to tell the tale, and as God is my witness I will tell it truthfully now, here in my ninetieth year, all praises be to Him and to the Mother who bore Him.

The matter of the Fountain, first.

Commonly, I know, it is called the Fountain of Youth. You will read that in many places, such as in the book about the New World which that Italian wrote who lived at Seville, Peter Martyr of Anghiera, where he says, "The governor of the Island of Boriquena, Juan Ponce de León, sent forth two caravels to seek the Islands of Boyuca in which the Indians affirmed there to be a fountain or spring whose water is of such marvelous virtue, that when it is drunk it makes old men young again."

This is true, so far as it goes. But when Peter Martyr talks of "making old men young again," his words must be interpreted in a poetic way.

Perhaps long life is truly what that Fountain really provides, along with its other and more special virtue—who knows? For I have tasted of that Fountain's waters myself, and here I am nearly ninety years of age and still full of vigor, I who was born in the year of our Lord 1473, and how many others are still alive today who came into the world then, when Castile and Aragon still were separate kingdoms? But I tell you that what Don Juan Ponce was seeking was not strictly speaking a Fountain of Youth at all, but rather a Fountain that offered a benefit of a very much intimate kind. For I was there, I saw and heard everything. And they have cowardly tongues, those who say it was a Fountain of Youth, for it would seem that out of shame they choose not to speak honestly of the actual nature of the powers that the Fountain which we sought was supposed to confer.

It was when we were in the island of Hispaniola that we first heard of this wonderful Fountain, Don Juan Ponce and I. This was, I think, in the year 1504. Don Juan Ponce, a true nobleman and a man of high and

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elegant thoughts, was governor then in the province of Higuey of that island, which was ruled at that time by Don Nicolás de Ovando, successor to the great Admiral Cristóbal Colón. There was in Higuey then a certain Indian cacique or chieftain of remarkable strength and force, who was reputed to keep seven wives and to satisfy each and every one of them each night of the week. Don Juan Ponce was curious about the great virility of this cacique, and one day he sent a certain Aurelio Herrera to visit him in his village.

"He does indeed have many wives," said Herrera, "though whether there were five or seven or fifty-nine I could not say, for there were women surrounding him all the time I was there, coming and going in such multitudes that I was unable to make a clear count, and swarms of children also, and from the looks of it the women were his wives and the children were his children."

"And what sort of manner of man is this cacique?" asked Don Juan Ponce.

"Why," said Herrera, "he is a very ordinary man, narrow of shoulders and shallow of chest, whom you would never think capable of such marvels of manhood, and he is past middle age besides. I remarked on this to him, and he said that when he was young he was easily exhausted and found the manly exercises a heavy burden. But then he journeyed to Boyuca, which is an island to the north of Cuba that is also called Bimini, and there he drank of a spring that cures the debility of sex. Since then, he asserts, he has been able to give pleasure to any number of women in a night without the slightest fatigue."

I was there. I saw and heard everything. *El enflaquecimiento del sexo* was the phrase that Aurelio Herrera used, "the debility of sex." The eyes of Don Juan Ponce de León opened wide at this tale, and he turned to me and said, "We must go in search of this miraculous fountain some day, Francisco, for there will be great profit in the selling of its waters."

Do you see? Not a word had been spoken about long life, but only about the curing of *el enflaquecimiento del sexo*. Nor was Don Juan Ponce in need of any such cure for himself, I assure you, for in the year 1504 he was just thirty years old, a lusty and aggressive man of fiery and restless spirit, and red-haired as well, and you know what is said about the virility of red-haired men. As for me, I will not boast, but I will say only that since the age of thirteen I have rarely gone a single night without a woman's company, and have been married four times, on the fourth occasion to a woman fifty years younger than myself. And if you find yourself in the province of Valladolid where I live and come to pay a call on me I can show you young Diego Antonio de Ortega whom you would think was my great-grandson, and little Juana María de Ortega who could be my great-granddaughter, for the boy is seven and the girl is

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five, but in truth they are my own children, conceived when I was past eighty years of age; and I have had many other sons and daughters too, some of whom are old people now and some are dead.

So it was not to heal our own debilities that Don Juan Ponce and I longed to find this wonderful Fountain, for of such shameful debilities we had none at all, he and I. No, we yearned for the Fountain purely for the sake of the riches we might derive from it: for each year saw hundreds or perhaps thousands of men come from Spain to the New World to seek their fortunes, and some of these were older men who no doubt suffered from a certain *enflaquecimiento*. In Spain I understand they use the powdered horn of the unicorn to cure this malady, or the crushed shells of a certain insect, though I have never had need of such things myself. But those commodities are not to be found in the New World, and it was Don Juan Ponce's hope that great profit might be made by taking possession of Bimini and selling the waters of the Fountain to those who had need of such a remedy. This is the truth, whatever others may claim.

But the pursuit of gold comes before everything, even the pursuit of miraculous Fountains of Manly Strength. We did not go at once in search of the Fountain because word came to Don Juan Ponce in Hispaniola that the neighboring island of Borinquen was rich in gold, and thereupon he applied to Governor Ovando for permission to go there and conquer it. Don Juan Ponce already somewhat knew that island, having seen its western coast briefly in 1493 when he was a gentleman volunteer in the fleet of Cristóbal Colón, and its beauty had so moved him that he had resolved someday to return and make himself master of the place.

With one hundred men, he sailed over to this Borinquen in a small caravel, landing there on Midsummer Day, 1506, at the same bay he had visited earlier aboard the ship of the great Admiral. Seeing us arrive with such force, the cacique of the region was wise enough to yield to the inevitable and we took possession with very little fighting.

So rich did the island prove to be that we put the marvelous Fountain of which we had previously heard completely out of our minds. Don Juan Ponce was made governor of Borinquen by royal appointment and for several years the natives remained peaceful and we were able to obtain a great quantity of gold indeed. This is the same island that Cristóbal Colón called San Juan Bautista and which people today call Puerto Rico.

All would have been well for us there but for the stupidity of a certain captain of our forces, Cristóbal de Sotomayor, who treated the natives so badly that they rose in rebellion against us. This was in the year of our Lord 1511. So we found ourselves at war; and Don Juan Ponce fought with all the great valor for which he was renowned, doing tremendous destruction against our pagan enemies. We had among us at that time

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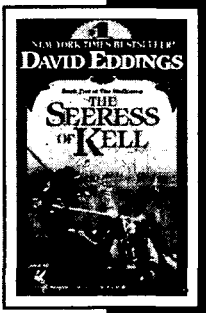

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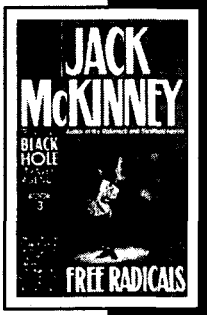

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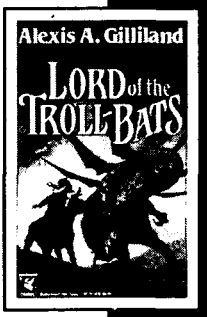

A SOOTHSAYER, A SECRET AGENT, AND A SOVEREIGN SORCERER—

FROM THE FIRST NAME IN IMAGINATION...

DEL REY

#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy
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a certain dog, called Bercerillo, of red pelt and black eyes, who could tell simply by smell alone whether an Indian was friendly to us or hostile, and could understand the native speech as well; and the Indians were more afraid of ten Spaniards with this dog, than of one hundred without him. Don Juan Ponce rewarded Bercerillo's bravery and cleverness by giving the dog a full share of all the gold and slaves we captured, as though he were a crossbowman; but in the end the Indians killed him. I understand that a valiant pup of this Bercerillo, Leoncillo by name, went with Nuñez de Balboa when he crossed the Isthmus of Panama and discovered the great ocean beyond.

During this time of our difficulties with the savages of Puerto Rico, Don Diego Colón, the son of the great Admiral, was able to take advantage of the trouble and make himself governor of the island in the place of Don Juan Ponce. Don Juan Ponce thereupon returned to Spain and presented himself before King Ferdinand, and told him the tale of the fabulous Fountain that restores manly power. King Ferdinand, who was greatly impressed by Don Juan Ponce's lordly bearing and noble appearance, at once granted him a royal permit to seek and conquer the isle of Bimini where this Fountain was said to be. Whether this signifies that His Most Catholic Majesty was troubled by debilities of a sexual sort, I would not dare to say. But the king was at that time a man of sixty years and it would not be unimaginable that some difficulty of that kind had begun to perplex him.

Swiftly Don Juan Ponce returned to Puerto Rico with the good news of his royal appointment, and on the third day of March of the year of our Lord 1513 we set forth from the Port of San Germán in three caravels to search for Bimini and its extraordinary Fountain.

I should say at this point that it was a matter of course that Don Juan Ponce should have asked me to take part in the quest for this Fountain. I am a man of Tervás de San Campos in the province of Valladolid, where Don Juan Ponce de León also was born less than one year after I was, and he and I played together as children and were friends all through our youth. As I have said, he first went to the New World in 1493, when he was nineteen years of age, as a gentleman aboard the ship of Admiral Cristóbal Colón, and after settling in Hispaniola he wrote to me and told me of the great wealth of the New World and urged me to join him there. Which I did forthwith; and we were rarely separated from then until the day of his death.

Our flagship was the *Santiago*, with Diego Bermúdez as its master—the brother to the man who discovered the isle of Bermuda—and the famous Antón de Alaminos as its pilot. We had two Indian pilots too, who knew the islands of that sea. Our second ship was the *Santa María de Consolación*, with Juan Bono de Quexo as its captain, and the third

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was the *San Cristóbal*. All of these vessels were purchased by Don Juan Ponce himself out of the riches he had laid by in the time when he was governor of Puerto Rico.

I have to tell you that there was not one priest in our company, not that we were ungodly men but only that it was not our commander's purpose on this voyage to bring the word of Jesus to the natives of Bimini. We did have some few women among us, including my own wife Beatriz, who had come out from Spain to be with me, and grateful I was to have her by my side; and my wife's young sister Juana was aboard the ship also, that I could better look after her among these rough Spaniards of the New World.

Northward we went. After ten days we halted at the isle of San Salvador to scrape weeds from the bottom of one of our ships. Then we journeyed west-northwest, passing the isle of Ciguateo on Easter Sunday, and, continuing onward into waters that ran ever shallower, we caught sight on the second day of April of a large delightful island of great and surpassing beauty, all blooming and burgeoning with a great host of wildflowers whose delectable odors came wafting to us on the warm gentle breeze. We named this isle La Florida, because Easter is the season when things flower and so we call that time of year in our language *Pascua Florida*. And we said to one another at once, seeing so beautiful a place, that this island of Florida must surely be the home of the wondrous Fountain that restores men to their fleshly powers and grants all their carnal desires to the fullest.

Of the loveliness of Florida I could speak for a day and a night and a night and a day, and not exhaust its marvels. The shallowing green waters give way to white crests of foam that fall upon beaches paved hard with tiny shells; and when you look beyond the beach you see dunes and marshes, and beyond those a land altogether level, not so much as a hillock upon it, where glistening sluggish lagoons bordered brilliantly with rushes and sedges show the way to the mysterious forests of the interior.

Those forests! Palms and pines, and gnarled gray trees whose names are known only to God! Trees covered with snowy beards! Trees whose leaves are like swords! Flowers everywhere, dizzying us with their perfume! We were stunned by the fragrance of jasmine and honeyflower. We heard the enchanting songs of a myriad of birds. We stared in wonder at the bright blooms. We doffed our helmets and dropped to our knees to give thanks to God for having led us to this most beautiful of shores.

Don Juan Ponce was the first of us to make his way to land, carrying with him the banner of Castile and León. He thrust the royal standard into the soft sandy soil and in the name of God and Spain took possession

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of the place. This was at the mouth of a river which he named in honor of his patron, the blessed San Juan. Then, since there were no Indians thereabouts who might lead us to the Fountain, we returned to our vessels and continued along the coast of that place.

Though the sea looked gentle we found the currents unexpectedly strong, carrying us northward so swiftly that we feared we would never see Puerto Rico again. Therefore did Don Juan Ponce give orders for us to turn south; but although we had a fair following wind the current was so strong against us that we could make no headway, and at last we were compelled to anchor in a cove. Here we spent some days, with the ships straining against their cables; and during that time the little *San Cristóbal* was swept out to sea and we lost sight of her altogether, though the day was bright and the weather fair. But within two days by God's grace she returned to us.

At this time we saw our first Indians, but they were far from friendly. Indeed they set upon us at once and two of our men were wounded by their little darts and arrows, which were tipped with sharp points made of bone. When night came we were able to withdraw and sail on to another place that we called the Río de la Cruz, where we collected wood and water; and here we were attacked again, by sixty Indians, but they were driven off. And so we continued for many days, until in latitude 28 degrees 15 minutes we did round a cape, which we called Cabo de los Corrientes on account of the powerful currents, which were stronger than the wind.

Here it was that we had the strangest part of our voyage, indeed the strangest thing I have ever seen in all my ninety years. Which is to say that we encountered at this time in this remote and hitherto unknown land the defenders of the Christian Faith, the sworn foes of the Saracens, the last sons of the Crusades, whose great dream it was, even now, to wrest the Holy Land of our Savior's birth from those infidel followers of Muhammad who seized it long ago and rule it today.

We suspected nothing of any of what awaited us when we dropped our anchors near an Indian town on the far side of Cabo de los Corrientes. Cautiously, for we had received such a hostile reception farther up the coast, we made our landfall a little way below the village and set about the task of filling our water casks and cutting firewood. While this work was being carried out we became aware that the Indians had left their village and had set out down the shore to encounter us, for we heard them singing and chanting even before we could see them; and we halted in our labors and made ourselves ready to deal with another attack.

After a short while the Indians appeared, still singing as they approached. Wonder of wonders, they were clothed, though all the previous natives that we had seen were naked, or nearly so, as these savages

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usually are. Even more marvelous was the nature of their clothing, which was of a kind not very different from that which Christians wear, jerkins and doublets and tunics, and such things. And—marvel of marvels—every man of them wore upon his chest a white garment that bore the holy cross of Jesus painted brightly in red! We could not believe our eyes. But if we had any doubt that these were Christian men, it was eradicated altogether when we saw that in the midst of the procession came certain men wearing the dark robes of priests, who carried great wooden crosses held high aloft.

Were these indeed Indians? Surely not! Surely they must be Spaniards like ourselves! We might almost have been in Toledo, or Madrid, or Seville, and not on the shore of some strange land of the Indies! But indeed we saw without doubt now that the marchers were men of the sort that is native to the New World, with the ruddy skins and black hair and sharp features of their kind, Christian though they might be in dress, and carrying the cross itself in their midst.

When they were close enough so that we could hear distinctly the words of their song, it sounded to some of us that they might be Latin words, though Latin of a somewhat barbarous kind. Could that be possible? We doubted the evidence of our ears. But then Pedro de Plasencia, who had studied for the priesthood before entering the military, crossed himself most vigorously and said to us in wonder, "Do you hear that? They are singing the *Gloria in excelsis Deo!*" And in truth we could tell that hymn was what they sang, now that Pedro de Plasencia had picked out the words of it for us. Does that sound strange to you, that Indians of an unknown isle should be singing in Latin? Yes, it is strange indeed. But doubt me at your peril. I was there; I saw and heard everything myself.

"Surely," said Diego Bermúdez, "there must have been Spaniards here before us, who have instructed these people in the way of God."

"That cannot be," said our pilot, Antón de Alaminos. "For I was with Cristóbal Colón on his second voyage and have been on every voyage since of any note that has been made in these waters, and I can tell you that no white man has set foot on this shore before us."

"Then how came these Indians by their crosses and their holy hymns?" asked Diego Bermúdez. "Is it a pure miracle of the saints, do you think?"

"Perhaps it is," said Don Juan Ponce de León, with some heat, for it looked as if there might be a quarrel between the master and the pilot. "Who can say? Be thankful that these folk are our Christian friends and not our enemy, and leave off your useless speculations."

And in the courageous way that was his nature, Don Juan Ponce went forward and raised his arms to the Indians, and made the sign of the cross in the air, and called out to them, saying, "I am Don Juan Ponce

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de León of Valladolid in the land of Spain, and I greet you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." All of which he said clearly and loudly in his fine and beautiful Castilian, which he spoke with the greatest purity. But the Indians, who by now had halted in a straight line before us, showed no understanding in their eyes. Don Juan Ponce spoke again, once more in Spanish, saying that he greeted them also in the name of His Most Catholic Majesty King Ferdinand of Aragon and Castile. This too produced no sign that it had been understood.

One of the Indians then spoke. He was a man of great presence and bearing, who wore chains of gold about his chest and carried a sword of strange design at his side, the first sword I had ever seen a native of these islands to have. From these indications it was apparent that he was the cacique.

He spoke long and eloquently in a language that I suppose was his own, for none of us had ever heard it before, not even the two Indian pilots we had brought with us. Then he said a few words that had the sound and the ring of French or perhaps Catalan, though we had a few men of Barcelona among us who leaned close toward him and put their hands to their ears and even they could make no sense out of what they heard.

But then finally this grand cacique spoke words which we all could understand plainly, garbled and thick-tongued though his speaking of them was: for what he said was, and there could be no doubt of it however barbarous his accent, *"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,"* and he made the sign of the cross over his chest as any good Christian man would do. To which Don Juan replied, "Amen. *Dominus vobiscum.*" Whereupon the cacique, exclaiming, *"Et cum spiritu tuo,"* went forthrightly to the side of Don Juan Ponce, and they embraced with great love, likewise as any Christian men might do, here on this remote beach in this strange and lovely land of Florida.

They brought us then to their village and offered a great feast for us, with roasted fish and the meat of tortoises and sweet fruits of many mysterious kinds, and made us presents of the skins of animals. For our part we gave them such trinkets as we had carried with us, beads and bracelets and little copper daggers and the like, but of all the things we gave them they were most eager to receive the simple figurines of Jesus on the cross that we offered them, and passed them around amongst themselves in wonder, showing such love for them as if they were made of the finest gold and studded with emeralds and rubies. And we said privately to each other that we must be dreaming, to have met with Indians in this land who were of such great devotion to the faith.

We tried to speak with them again in Spanish, but it was useless, and

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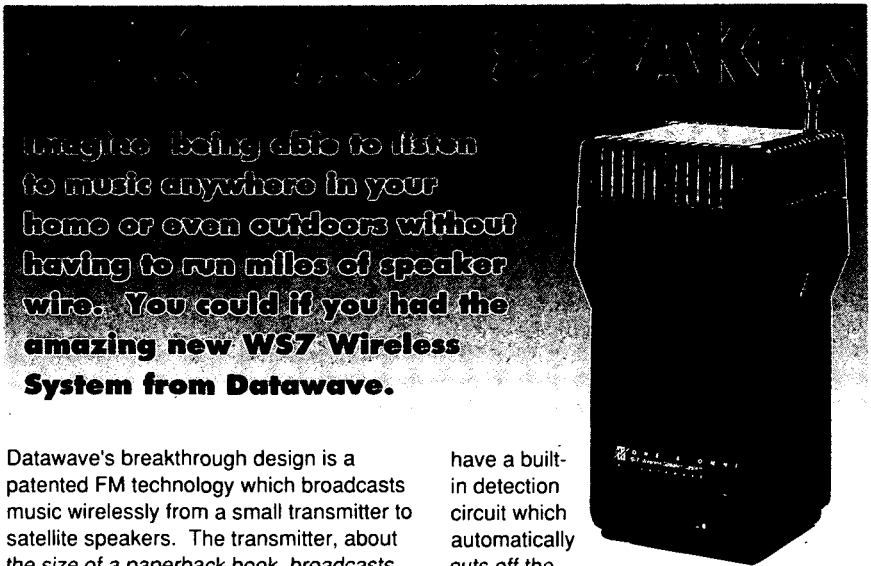
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so too was speaking in any of the native tongues of Hispaniola or Puerto Rico that we knew. In their turn they addressed us in their own language, which might just as well have been the language of the people of the Moon for all we comprehended it, and also in that tantalizing other tongue which seemed almost to be French or Catalan. We could not make anything of that, try though we did. But Pedro de Plasencia, who was the only one of us who could speak Latin out loud like a priest, sat down with the cacique after the meal and addressed him in that language. I mean not simply saying things like the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria, which any child can say, but speaking to him as if Latin was a real language with words and sentences of common meaning, the way it was long ago. To which the cacique answered, though he seemed to be framing his words with much difficulty; and Pedro answered him again, just as hesitatingly; and so they went on, talking to each other in a slow and halting way, far into the night, nodding and smiling most jubilantly whenever one of them reached some understanding of the other's words, while we looked on in astonishment, unable to fathom a word of what they were saying.

At last Pedro rose, looking pale and exhausted like a man who has carried a bull on his back for half a league, and came over to us where we were sitting in a circle.

"Well?" Don Juan Ponce demanded at once.

Pedro de Plasencia shook his head wearily. "It was all nonsense, what the cacique said. I understood nothing. Nothing at all! It was mere incomprehensible babble and no more than that." And he picked up a leather sack of wine that lay near his feet and drank from it as though he had a thirst that no amount of drinking ever could quench.

"You appeared to comprehend, at times," said Don Juan Ponce. "Or so it seemed to me as I watched you."

"Nothing. Not a word. Let me sleep on it, and perhaps it will come clear to me in the morning."

I thought Don Juan Ponce would pursue him on the matter. But Don Juan Ponce, though he was an impatient and high-tempered man, was also a man of great sagacity, and he knew better than to press Pedro further at a time when he seemed so troubled and fatigued. So he dismissed the company and we settled down in the huts that the Indians had given us for lodging, all except those of us who were posted as sentries during the night to guard against treachery.

I rose before dawn. But I saw that Don Juan Ponce and Pedro de Plasencia were already awake and had drawn apart from the rest of us and were talking most earnestly. After a time they returned, and Don Juan Ponce beckoned to me.

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"Pedro has told me something of his conversation with the cacique," he said.

"And what is it that you have learned?"

"That these Indians are indeed Christians."

"Yes, that seems to be the plain truth, strange though it seems," I said. "For they do carry the cross about, and sing the *Gloria*, and honor the Father and the Son."

"There is more."

I waited.

He continued, "Unless Pedro much mistook what the cacique told him, the greatest hope in which these people live is that of wresting the Holy Land from the Saracen, and restoring it to good Christian pilgrims."

At that I burst out into such hearty laughter that Don Juan Ponce, for all his love of me, looked at me with eyes flashing with reproof. Yet I could not withhold my mirth, which poured from me like a river.

I said at last, when I had mastered myself, "But tell me, Don Juan, what would these savages know of the Holy Land, or of Saracens, or any such thing? The Holy Land is thousands of leagues away, and has never been spoken of so much as once in this New World by any man, I think; nor does anyone speak of the Crusade any longer in this age, neither here nor at home."

"It is very strange, I agree," replied Don Juan Ponce. "Nevertheless, so Pedro swears, the cacique spoke to him of *Terra Sancta, Terra Sancta*, and of infidels, and the liberation of the city of Jerusalem."

"And how does it come to pass," I asked, "that they can know of such things, in this remote isle, where no white man has ever visited before?"

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce, "that is the great mystery, is it not?"

In time we came to understand the solution to this mystery, though the tale was muddled and confused, and emerged only after much travail, and long discussions between Pedro de Plasencia and the cacique of the Indians. I will tell you the essence of it, which was this:

Some three hundred years ago, or perhaps it was four hundred, while much of our beloved Spain still lay under the Moorish hand, a shipload of Frankish warriors set sail from the port of Genoa, or perhaps it was Marseilles, or some other city along the coast of Provence. This was in the time when men still went crusading, to make war for Jesus' sake in the Holy Land against the followers of Muhammad who occupied that place.

But the voyage of these Crusaders miscarried; for when they entered the great Mar Mediterraneo, thinking to go east they were forced west by terrible storms and contrary winds, and swept helpless past our Spanish shores, past Almería and Málaga and Tarifa, and through the narrow

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waist of the Estrecho de Gibraltar and out into the vastness of the Ocean Sea.

Here, having no sound knowledge as we in our time do of the size and shape of the African continent, they thought to turn south and then east below Egypt and make their voyage yet to the Holy Land. Of course this would be impossible, except by rounding the Buena Fortuna cape and traveling up past Arabia, a journey almost beyond our means to this day. But being unaware of that, these bold but hapless men made the attempt, coasting southerly and southerly and southerly, and the land of course not only not ending but indeed carrying them farther and farther outward into the Ocean Sea, until at last, no doubt weary and half dead of famine, they realized that they had traveled so far to the west that there was no hope of returning eastward again, nor of turning north and making their way back into the Mediterraneo. So they yielded to the westerly winds that prevail near the Canary Isles, and allowed themselves to be blown clear across the sea to the Indies. And so after long arduous voyaging they made landfall in this isle we call Florida. Thus these men of three hundred years ago were the first discoverers of the New World, although I doubt very greatly that they comprehended what it was that they had achieved.

You must understand that we received few of these details from our Indian hosts: only the tale that men bound to Terra Sancta departing from a land in the east were blown off course some hundreds of years previous and were brought after arduous sailing to the isle of Florida and to this very village where our three caravels had made their landfall. All the rest did we conclude for ourselves, that they were Crusaders and so forth, after much discussing of the matter and recourse to the scholarship that the finest men among us possessed.

And what befell these men of the Crusade, when they came to this Florida? Why, they offered themselves to the mercies of the villagers, who greeted them right honorably and took them to dwell amongst them, and married them to their daughters! And for their part the seafarers offered the word of Jesus to the people of the village and thereby gave them hope of Heaven; and taught these kindly savages the Latin tongue so well that it remained with them after a fashion hundreds of years afterward, and also some vestiges of the common speech that the seafaring men had had in their own native land.

But most of all did the strangers from the sea imbue in the villagers the holy desire to rid the birthplace of Jesus of the dread hand of the Mussulman; and ever, in years after, did the Christian Indians of this Florida village long to put to sea, and cross the great ocean, and wield their bows and spears valiantly amidst the paynim enemy in the defense of the True Faith. Truly, how strange are the workings of God Almighty,

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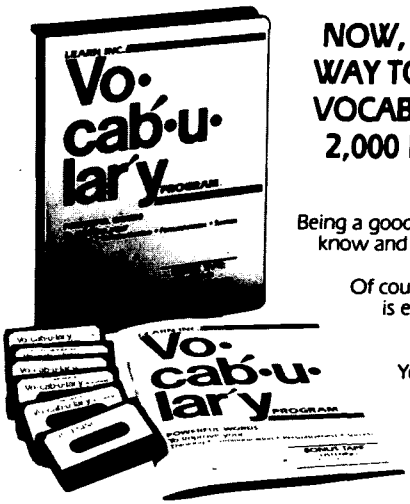

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how far beyond our comprehension, that He should make Crusaders out of the naked Indians in this far-off place!

You may ask what became of those European men who landed there, and whether we saw anyone who plainly might mark his descent from them. And I will tell you that those ancient Crusaders, who intermarried with the native women since they had brought none of their own, were wholly swallowed up by such intermarrying and were engulfed by the fullness of time. For they were only forty or fifty men among hundreds, and the passing centuries so diluted the strain of their race that not the least trace of it remained, and we saw no pale skin or fair hair or blue eyes or other marks of European men here. But the ideas that they had fetched to this place did survive, that is, the practicing of the Catholic faith and the speaking of a debased and corrupt sort of Latin and the wearing of a kind of European clothes, and such. And I tell you it was passing strange to see these red savages in their surplices and cassocks, and in their white tunics bearing the great emblem of our creed, and other such ancient marks of our civilization, and to hear them chanting the *Kyrie eleison* and the *Confiteor* and the *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth* in that curious garbled way of theirs, like words spoken in a dream.

Nay, I have spoken untruthfully, for the men of that lost voyage did leave other remnants of themselves among the villagers beside our holy faith, which I have neglected to mention here, but which I will tell you of now.

For after we had been in that village several days, the cacique led us through the close humid forest along a tangled trail to a clearing nearby just to the north of the village, and here we saw certain tangible remains of the voyagers: a graveyard with grave markers of white limestone, and the rotting ribs and strakes and some of the keel of a seafaring vessel of an ancient design, and the foundation walls of a little wooden church. All of which things were as sad a sight as could be imagined, for the gravestones were so weathered and worn that although we could see the faint marks of names we could not read the names themselves, and the vessel was but a mere sorry remnant, a few miserable decaying timbers, and the church was only a pitiful fragment of a thing.

We stood amidst these sorry ruins and our hearts were struck into pieces by pity and grief for these brave men, so far from home and lonely, who in this strange place had nevertheless contrived to plant the sacred tree of Christianity. And the noble Don Juan Ponce de León went down on his knees before the church and bowed his head and said, "Let us pray, my friends, for the souls of these men, as we hope that someday people will pray for ours."

* * *

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We spent some days amongst these people in feasting and prayer, and replenishing our stock of firewood and water. And then Don Juan Ponce gave new thought to the primary purpose of our voyage, which was, to find the miraculous Fountain that renews a man's energies. He called Pedro de Plasencia to his side and said, "Ask of the cacique, whether he knows such a Fountain."

"It will not be easy, describing such things in my poor Latin," answered Pedro. "I had my Latin from the Church, Don Juan, and what I learned there is of little use here, and it was all so very long ago."

"You must try, my friend. For only you of all our company has the power to speak with him and be understood."

Whereupon Pedro went to the cacique; but I could see even at a distance that he was having great difficulties. For he would speak a few halting words, and then he would act out his meaning with gestures, like a clown upon a stage, and then he would speak again. There would be silence; and then the cacique would reply, and I would see Pedro leaning forward most intently, trying to catch the meaning of the curious Latin that the cacique spoke. They did draw pictures for each other also in the sand, and point to the sky and sweep their arms to and fro, and do many another thing to convey to each other the sense of their words, and so it went, hour after hour.

At length Pedro de Plasencia returned to where we stood, and said, "There does appear to be a source of precious water that they cherish on this island, which they call the Blue Spring."

"And is this Blue Spring the Fountain for which we search?" Don Juan Ponce asked, all eagerness.

"Ah, of that I am not certain."

"Did you tell him that the water of it would allow a man to take his pleasure with women all day and all night, and never tire of it?"

"So I attempted to say."

"With many women, one after another?"

"These are Christian folk, Don Juan!"

"Yes, so they are. But they are Indians also. They would understand such a thing, just as any man of Estremadura or Galicia or Andalusia would understand such a thing, Christian though he be."

Pedro de Plasencia nodded. "I told him what I could, about the nature of the Fountain for which we search. And he listened very close, and he said, yes, yes, you are speaking of the Blue Spring."

"So he understood you, then?"

"He understood something of what I said, Don Juan, so I do firmly believe. But whether he understood it all, that is only for God to know."

I saw the color rise in Don Juan Ponce's face, and I knew that restless

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choleric nature of his was coming to the fore, which had always been his great driving force and also his most perilous failing.

He said to Pedro de Plasencia, "And will he take us to this Blue Spring of his, do you think?"

"I think he will," said Pedro. "But first he wishes to enact a treaty with us, as the price of transporting us thither."

"A treaty."

"A treaty, yes. He wants our aid and assistance."

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce. "And how can we be of help to these people, do you think?"

"They want us to show them how to build seafaring ships," said Pedro. "So that they can sail across the Ocean Sea, and go to the rescue of the Holy Land, and free it from the paynim hordes."

There was much more of back and forth, and forth and back, in these negotiations, until Pedro de Plasencia grew weary indeed, and there was not enough wine in our sacks to give him the rest he needed, so that we had to send a boat out to fetch more from one of our ships at anchor in the harbor. For it was a great burden upon him to conduct these conversations, he remembering only little patches of Church Latin from his boyhood, and the cacique speaking a language that could be called Latin only by great courtesy. I sat with them as they talked, on several occasions, and not for all my soul could I understand a thing that they said to each other. From time to time Pedro would lose his patience and speak out in Spanish, or the cacique would begin to speak in his savage tongue or else in that other language, somewhat like Provençal, which must have been what the seafaring Crusaders spoke amongst themselves. But none of that added to the understanding between the two men, which I think was a very poor understanding indeed.

It became apparent after a time that Pedro had misheard the cacique's terms of treaty: what he wished us to do was not to teach them how to build ships but to *give* them one of ours in which to undertake their Crusade.

"It cannot be," replied Don Juan Ponce, when he had heard. "But tell him this, that I will undertake to purchase ships for him with my own funds, in Spain. Which I will surely do, after we have received the proceeds from the sale of the water from the Fountain."

"He wishes to know how many ships you will provide," said Pedro de Plasencia, after another conference.

"Two," said Don Juan Ponce. "No: three. Three fine caravels."

Which Pedro duly told the cacique; but his way of telling him was to point to our three ships in the harbor, which led the cacique into thinking that Don Juan Ponce meant to give him those three actual ships then

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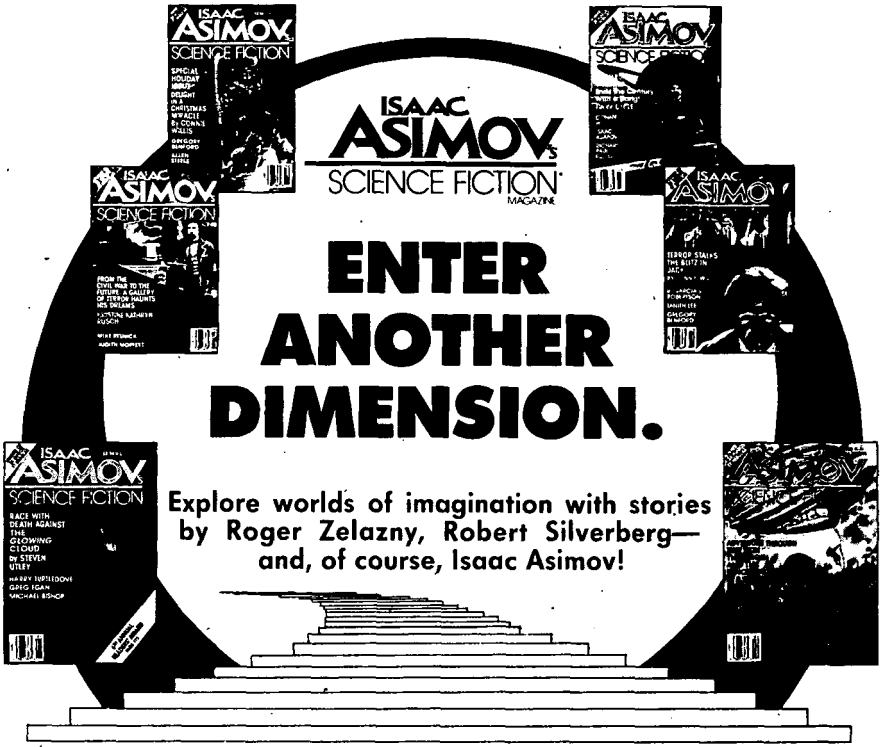
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and now, and that required more hours of conferring to repair. But at length all was agreed on both sides, and our journey toward the Blue Spring was begun.

The cacique himself accompanied us, and the three priests of the tribe, carrying the heavy wooden crosses that were their staffs of office, and perhaps two dozen of the young men and girls of the village. In our party there were ten men, Don Juan Ponce and Pedro and I, and seven ordinary seamen carrying barrels in which we meant to store the waters of the Fountain. My wife Beatriz and her sister Juana accompanied us also, for I never would let them be far from me.

Some of the ordinary seamen among us were rough men of Estremadura, who spoke jestingly and with great licentiousness of how often they would embrace the girls of the native village after they had drunk of the Fountain. I had to silence them, reminding them that my wife and her sister could overhear their words. Yet I wondered privately what effects the waters would have on my own manhood: not that it had ever been lacking in any aspect, but I could not help asking myself if I would find it enhanced beyond its usual virtue, for such curiosity is but a natural thing to any man, as you must know.

We journeyed for two days, through hot close terrain where insects of great size buzzed among the flowers and birds of a thousand colors astounded our eyes. And at last we came to a place of bare white stone, flat like all other places in this isle of Florida, where clear cool blue water gushed up out of the ground with wondrous force.

The cacique gestured grandly, with a great sweep of his arms.

"It is the Blue Spring," said Pedro de Plasencia.

Our men would have rushed forward at once to lap up its waters like greedy dogs at a pond; but the cacique cried out, and Don Juan Ponce also in that moment ordered them to halt. There would be no unseemly haste here, he said. And it was just as well he did, for we very soon came to see that this spring was a holy place to the people of the village, and it would have been profaned by such an assault on it, to our possible detriment and peril.

The cacique came forward, with his priests beside him, and gestured to Don Juan Ponce to kneel and remove his helmet. Don Juan Ponce obeyed; and the cacique took his helmet from him, and passed it to one of the priests, who filled it with water from the spring and poured it down over Don Juan Ponce's face and neck, so that Don Juan Ponce laughed out loud. The laughter seemed to offend the Indians, for they showed looks of disapproval, and Don Juan Ponce at once grew silent.

The Indians spoke words which might almost have been Latin words, and there was much elevating of their crosses as the water was poured down over Don Juan Ponce, after which he was given the order to rise.

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And then one by one we stepped forth, and the Indians did the same to each of us.

"It is very like a rite of holy baptism, is it not?" said Aurelio Herrera to me.

"Yes, very much like a baptism," I said to him.

And I began to wonder: How well have we been understood here? Is it a new access of manly strength that these Indians are conferring upon us, or rather the embrace of the Church? For surely there is nothing about this rite that speaks of anything else than a religious enterprise. But I kept silent, since it was not my place to speak.

When the villagers were done dousing us with water, and speaking words over us and elevating their crosses, which made me more sure than ever that we were being taken into the congregation of their faith, we were allowed to drink of the spring—they did the same—and to fill our barrels. Don Juan Ponce turned to me after we had drunk, and winked at me and said, "Well, old friend, this will serve us well in later years, will it not? For though we have no need of such invigoration now, you and I, nevertheless time will have its work with us as it does with all men."

"If it does," I said, "why, then, we are fortified against it now indeed."

But in truth I felt no change within. The water was pure and cool and good, but it had seemed merely to be water to me, with no great magical qualities about it; and when I turned and looked upon my wife Beatriz, she seemed pleasing to me as she always had, but no more than that. Well, so be it, I thought; this may be the true Fountain or maybe it is not, and only time will tell; and we began our return to the village, carrying the casks of water with us; and the day of our return, Pedro de Plasencia drew up a grand treaty on a piece of bark from a tree, in which we pledged our sacred honor and our souls to do all in our power to supply this village with good Spanish ships so that the villagers would be able to fulfill their pledge to liberate the Holy Land.

"Which we will surely do for them," said Don Juan Ponce with great conviction. "For I mean to come back to this place as soon as I am able, with many ships of our own as well as the vessels I have promised them from Spain; and we will fill our holds with cask upon cask of this virtuous water from the Fountain, and replenish our fortunes anew by selling that water to those who need its miraculous power. Moreover we ourselves will benefit from its use in our declining days. And also we will bring this cacique some priests, who will correct him in his manner of practicing our faith, and guide him in his journey to Jerusalem. All of which I will swear by a great oath upon the Cross itself, in the presence of the cacique, so that he may have no doubt whatsoever of our kindly Christian purposes."

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And so we departed, filled with great joy and no little wonder at all that we had seen and heard.

Well, and none of the brave intentions of Don Juan Ponce were fulfilled, as you surely must know, inasmuch as the valiant Don Juan Ponce de León never saw Spain again, nor did he live to enjoy the rejuvenations of his body that he hoped the water of the Fountain would bring him in his later years. For when we left the village of the Indian Crusaders, we continued on our way along the coast of the isle of Florida a little further in a southerly direction, seeking to catch favorable winds and currents that would carry us swiftly back to Puerto Rico; and on the 23rd of May we halted in a pleasing bay to gather wood and water—for we would not touch the water of our casks from the Fountain!—and to careen the *San Cristóbal*, the hull of which was fouled with barnacles. And as we did our work there, a party of Indians came forth out of the woods.

"Hail, brothers in Christ!" Don Juan Ponce called to them with great cheer, for the cacique had told him that his people had done wonderful things in bringing their neighbors into the embrace of Jesus, and he thought now that surely all the Indians of this isle had been converted to the True Faith by those Crusading men of long ago.

But he was wrong in that; for these Indians were no Christians at all, but only pagan savages like most of their kind, and they replied instantly to Don Juan Ponce's halloos with a volley of darts and arrows that struck five of us dead then and there before we were able to drive them off. And among those who took his mortal wound that day was the valiant and noble Don Juan Ponce de León of Valladolid, in the thirty-ninth year of his life.

I knelt beside him on the beach in his last moments, and said the last words with him. And he looked up at me and smiled—for death had never been frightening to him—and he said to me, almost with his last breath, "There is only one thing that I regret, Francisco. And that is that I will never know, now, what powers the water of that Fountain would have conferred upon me, when I was old and greatly stricken with the frailty of my years." With that he perished.

What more can I say? We made our doleful way back to Puerto Rico, and told our tale of Crusaders and Indians and cool blue waters. But we were met with laughter, and there were no purchasers for the contents of our casks, and our fortunes were greatly depleted. All praise be to God, I survived that dark time and went on afterward to join the magnificent Hernando Cortés in his conquest of the land of Mexico, which today is called New Spain, and in the fullness of time I returned to my native province of Valladolid with much gold in my possession, and here I live in health and vigor to this day.

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Often do I think of the isle of Florida and those Christian Indians we found there. It is fifty years since that time. In those fifty years the cacique and his people have rendered most of Florida into Christians by now, as we now know, and I tell you what is not generally known, that this expansion of their nation was brought about the better to support their Crusade against the Mussulman once the ships that Don Juan Ponce promised them had arrived.

So there is a great warlike Christian kingdom in Florida today, filling all that land and spreading over into adjacent isles, against which we men of Spain so far have struggled in vain as we attempt to extend our sway to those regions. I think it was poor Don Juan Ponce de León, in his innocent quest for a miraculous Fountain, who without intending it caused them to become so fierce, by making them a promise which he could not fulfill, and leaving them thinking that they had been betrayed by false Christians. Better that they had remained forever in the isolation in which they lived when we found them, singing the *Gloria* and the *Credo* and the *Sanctus*, and waiting with Christian patience for the promised ships that were to take them to the reconquest of the Holy Land. But those ships did not come; and they see us now as traitors and enemies.

I often think also of the valiant Don Juan Ponce, and his quest for the wondrous Fountain. Was the Blue Spring indeed the Fountain of legend? I am not sure of that. It may be that those Indians misunderstood what Pedro de Plasencia was requesting of them, and that they were simply offering us baptism—us, good Christians all our lives!—when what we sought was something quite different from that.

But if the Fountain was truly the one we sought, I feel great sorrow and pity for Don Juan Ponce. For though he drank of its waters, he died too soon to know of its effects. Whereas here I am, soon to be ninety years old, and the father of a boy of seven and a girl of five.

Was it the Fountain's virtue that has given me so long and robust a life, or have I simply enjoyed the favor of God? How can I say? Whichever it is, I am grateful; and if ever there is peace between us and the people of the Isle of Florida, and you should find yourself in the vicinity of that place, you could do worse, I think, than to drink of that Blue Spring, which will do you no harm and may perhaps bring you great benefit. If by chance you go to that place, seek out the Indians of the village nearby, and tell them that old Francisco de Ortega remembers them, and cherishes the memory, and more than once has had a Mass said in their praise despite all the troubles they have caused his countrymen, for he knows that they are the last defenders of the Holy Land against the paynim infidels.

This is my story, and the story of Don Juan Ponce de León and the

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miraculous Fountain, which the ignorant call the Fountain of Youth, and of the Christian Indians of Florida who yearn to free the Holy Land. You may wonder about the veracity of these things, but I beg you, have no doubt on that score. All that I have told you is true. For I was there. I saw and heard everything.●

NEXT ISSUE

L. Sprague de Camp returns to these pages next month after an absence of more than fourteen years, contributing our fast-paced and exciting June cover story, "The Big Splash." De Camp is one of the true giants of the field, a seminal figure whose career spans almost the entire development of modern science fiction, from Campbell's Golden Age *Astounding* of the '40s to the present day, and you'll catch him at the top of his form in "The Big Splash," a direct sequel to his famous story "A Gun for Dinosaur." This one takes Reginald Rivers and a band of intrepid scientists back through time to attempt to observe the mysterious cosmic catastrophe that wiped out the majority of all living things at the end of the Cretaceous, including all the dinosaurs. As Reggie soon discovers, though, the problem is not to observe it so *closely* that you become extinct *yourself*.... This is a hugely entertaining story, from the hand of one of the Masters—don't miss it!

ALSO IN JUNE: hot new writer **R. Garcia y Robertson** gives us a disturbing look at some strange "family" relationships in a troubled future in the chilling "Breakfast Cereal Killers," one of the most powerful stories you're likely to read *this* year; popular new British writer **Ian R. MacLeod** takes us to a world that's very like our own—except for all the ways that count the *most*—to relate one of the most bizarre Coming-Of-Age stories ever told, in "Grownups"; **James Patrick Kelly,** one of our most popular writers, returns with the unsettling story of a troubled man embroiled in a life-or-death struggle with some scary "Monsters"; critically acclaimed new writer **Elizabeth Hand** makes a hilarious *IAsfm* debut with a very funny look at the differences between the Haves and "The Have-Nots"; **M.Shayne Bell** takes us to a strange future civilization on the verge of destruction in "Second Lives." renowned British writer **Garry Kilworth** takes us to the bustling streets of modern-day Hong Kong for some bittersweet "Memories of the Flying Ball Bike Shop"; and **Steven Utley** returns with "Die Rache," a razor-edged little shocker that demonstrates that you can run, but you can't *hide*. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstands on April 28, 1992—or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of our upcoming issues!

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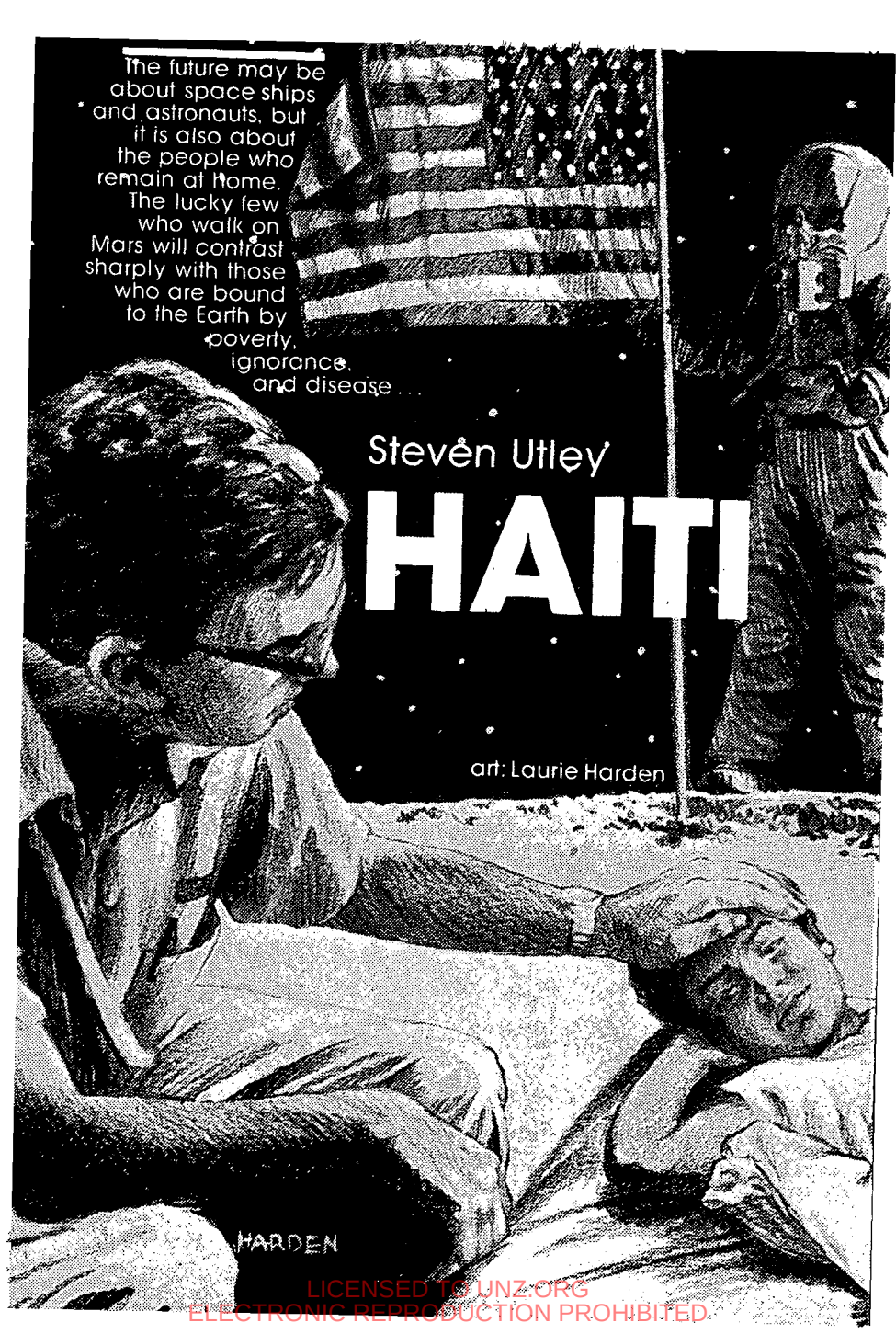
The future may be about space ships and astronauts, but it is also about the people who remain at home. The lucky few who walk on Mars will contrast sharply with those who are bound to the Earth by poverty, ignorance, and disease...
Stevên Utley
HAITI
art: Laurie Harden
HARDEN

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Miami was coming in so strong and clear that it fairly blasted me awake. Usually, you couldn't get it all. Every once in a great while, atmospherics would bounce it right to my bedside. The signal would arrive so winded and shivery from its run down the Cuba-Bahama gantlet that feeble, sputtery Radio Soleil could bully it to extinction. But not today. Today, the news was that the U. S. expedition to Mars had finally reached its destination. You had to figure that Miami would boost its signal for something like that. You had to wonder what the Cubans were making of it as they huddled in their caves. Another *yanqui* stunt, probably.

I looked across the room at Velmont, who was sitting on the edge of his iron-frame bed, one sock on and one sock off. He seemed to be having trouble remembering whether he was supposed to be dressing or undressing. He reached a decision after a moment, took the one sock off, unbuttoned his shirt, began removing items from various pockets and placing them on the night table.

"Bad night?" I said.

He grunted noncommitally. "You're running late."

"We take you now to the White House," said the voice from the radio, "where the president is about to—"

"You're right," I said to Velmont, and switched the radio off. "How's our cholera patient?"

"Died in the night."

I watched him do a slow-motion keel-over. He must've been asleep the instant his head touched his pillow. Quietly but quickly, I got up, washed, dressed. He was snoring softly when I left the room.

Our quarters occupied half the second floor of a long, narrow building that served as the rear wall of a courtyard behind the hospital building. The other boundaries of the yard were defined by sheds housing Dr. de Rossarieu's van on one side and the kitchen and the laundry on the other; a strong gate and some unattractive sections of wall, built of cinder blocks and odd pieces of brick, had been erected in the gaps. Marie met me at the kitchen door with my breakfast, black coffee, hot bread, a piece of fruit. I took it into the hospital and ate in what we called the doctors' lounge, a corner separated from the ward by a rickety wooden partition.

De Rossarieu came in, red-eyed and uncombed. His clothes looked as if he'd slept in them, though he probably hadn't got more than fifteen minutes of sleep at a stretch during the past two or three days. Come my own bedtime, I slept hard; only that old cheap clock radio could rouse me any more. Depending upon how things were going with us otherwise, I thought de Rossarieu was either a remarkable human dynamo or else a mere crazy insomniac. Either way, he could be worrisome.

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By way of greeting, he said, in French, "Our cholera patient died in the night."

"Velmont told me."

"Not an hour ago, a mother brought in her child with the same blue coloration. She said she believed there are many more sick people, especially in Cité Carton." My heart sank when he mentioned Cité Carton, poorest part of Cité Soleil, poorest slum in Port-au-Prince, poorest city in the Americas. "Telephone service is limited this morning. I have already alerted the clinics and the Baptist mission, but not the Schweitzer. Not that anyone will have supplies to spare if we need them, but we must all be ready to meet this emergency."

I said, like a fool, "What about the mayor, the government?"

"The mayor appears not to have telephone service this morning. Perhaps we have no mayor this morning. I did talk to a Monsieur Lodeon, who evidently is the new public works minister. He understands the importance of locating the source of infection and has promised to find out which public pumps are in operation. One of the clinics is sending people to do the testing."

He paused for such a long time that I said, "Does that exhaust the government's resources?"

"I have also talked to someone at the health ministry," he said, "or whatever passes for it now. A Monsieur Bazile."

"And?"

"Perhaps, perhaps. He promised to give the matter personal attention."

We both knew how much we could depend on promises. We'd just have to do the best we could. Health-care providers in our situation had just had to do the best they could ever since the collapse of the World Health Organization. That old network was long gone, and there was no new network worthy of the name. We were nearly out of everything, bedspace, antibiotics, money, options. So was everybody else. Cholera control in the Caribbean was returning to the sorry state it'd been in before the first International Sanitary Conference in the 1890s.

De Rossarieu fastened a sorrowful eye on me and said, "We have to know how bad it is in our quarter. You must go to Cité Carton this morning. Take Georges with you. He can interpret for you. Creole sounds very strange when you speak it."

I barely heard the last part. My heart had sunk through the floor. Cité Carton!

"Velmont's a local boy," I said, "why not send him?" I instantly regretted my words. They made me sound like a slacker, a soft sluggish whining white boy.

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The doctor didn't reproach me, didn't, in fact, seem to mind the question at all. Still, his reply made me feel as if I had all the staying power of milk set in the hot sun. "Velmont has had a hard night," he said, "and needs his rest, and we can't wait even a few hours while he gets it. Two cases in the ward could mean hundreds, thousands, of cases out there. We have to know. We have to convince people to bring in anyone with cholera symptoms."

And not, I thought bitterly, anyone with the symptoms of one of the half-dozen other sanitation-related diseases that're always loose in Cité Carton.

"I think," he said, "the people have lost faith in us. Fewer and fewer come in for checkups—"

He stopped abruptly. His expression sagged. We operated under the auspices of the Medical Social Complex of Cité Soleil, which had begun over half a century before with a single clinic and gradually expanded to several more clinics and curative hospitals. We stressed preventive care. Four times a year, sick or not, everyone got a free checkup. As simple a system as that had cut the local infant-mortality rate from almost one in four to less than one in ten—as much of a miracle as anyone could've hoped to work here. Still, human miracles cost money, and not much of that had been forthcoming lately. We were losing more babies, one in eight, losing ground, one in seven, almost one in six. You had to wonder what the ones who were being saved were being saved for. AIDS? Tuberculosis?

I looked out into the ward and saw Nurse Siniamen and one of our Catholic Daughters of Charity moving about among the beds. The hospital had been a warehouse before its conversion. Beds, some screened, lined the walls, and there was a big square-angled archipelago of them in the center of the room. Everything had been put in with regard for efficient use of space. Yet it all looked like everything else in the country, tossed together, falling apart.

"We won't be able to take care of a dozen cholera patients," I said, "let alone hundreds or thousands."

De Rossarieu made no reply. He looked stuporous, looked stricken, and after a moment I thought, suddenly, clearly, and terrifiedly, Is he having a *stroke*? After a moment more, he shook off what was, after all, only a daze of exhaustion and started talking again, muttering to himself, "And how can we *blame* them for not coming in? Without medicines, equipment, we cannot help them. Without our help, they sicken and die. . . ."

De Rossaireu may have been a human dynamo, but he was an aging one, fifty-five, sixty years old if he was a day. Trying to save the world was going to drop him dead in his tracks one day, but first not being able to save the world was going to make him crazy. I put my hand on his

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arm, spoke his name sharply, watched him struggle to return to me, the hospital, his own body. He couldn't sleep and wouldn't use drugs. At the moment, he wasn't in any shape to treat hangnail, never mind cholera. I wished I could've ordered him to get some sleep, or else had the nerve to slip him a sleeping pill. That I would have to do on my own. Hard-working and efficient Nurse Siniamen would sooner have kissed a *fer-de-lance* than betray or defy him. She worshipped him, maybe loved him, and didn't care much for me at all. The rest of the day staff consisted of two Catholic Daughters of Charity. The place was relatively understaffed at night, with only Velmont and another Daughter in the ward, though de Rossarieu, the nurse, and I were always close by. This was Haiti. You just had to do the best you could.

I left the doctor in the lounge and made a quick circuit of the ward to let Nurse Siniamen know what was going on. Georges was helping his mother in the kitchen shed. He was twelve years old, tall for his age, wiry, quiet, and thoroughly Haitian in his attitude toward unpleasant work. It had to be done if it had to be done. I asked Marie to let me borrow him for a few hours. She clicked her tongue dismayedly when I mentioned Cité Carton but gave her permission. Georges just said, "Okay," a word he liked a lot.

I couldn't think of many worse ways to begin the day than with a stroll through a slum. A stroll it would be, too. The hospital had only one motor vehicle, de Rossarieu's ancient, smoky van, which we used, whenever we had precious gasoline, as an ambulance or to haul medical supplies. Not that there often were medical supplies. We had several bicycles, but even if I'd felt like risking my own—it was probably the most valuable possession I had at hand, and surely a temptation to some individuals—it would've been useless where I was going. There were no streets there, only crooked paths. Because of the rains, the ground would have the consistency of custard.

Nurse Siniamen helped the boy and me adjust the straps of our packs. She didn't say goodbye or wish us luck or anything, merely nodded wordlessly. After three years, she remained very conscious of my race and my nationality and probably believed I was a spy. Haitians had little cause to trust United Stateseans, who, after all, had spent over a hundred years mucking around here, until the place was finally, completely, irreversibly mucked up. Not that it had all been the fault of the U. S. government and U. S. business, not by a long shot: the Duvaliers and Bonne and the rest of those monsters had all been homeboys; King Henri Christophe had set the pattern in the early 1800s. Georges and I went out a side door. The morning was cool, for Haiti, and humid, laced with the fumes of fires and carrying a hint of ripened garbage from the direction of the harbor.

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You couldn't see both sides of the street for people. You almost couldn't move forward, either, if you were going against the current. No crowd anywhere in the world, not in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Mexico City, Calcutta, can be denser than a Port-au-Prince crowd. We were headed toward the muddy plain on which the slums festered. Traffic tried to turn us around and carry us back as it flowed from the worst parts of Cité Soleil through the less-bad parts—no part deserved to be called a good part. By comparison, downtown Port-au-Prince looked prosperous, as long as you didn't look too closely at the sad, tired Victorian structures and the pocked streets. Caribbean markets are, traditionally, crowded and noisy places where the lure of commerce was irresistible, but here it was strictly subsistence commerce, and the noise is less exuberant than desperate. Once, I'd read, Port-au-Prince was full of beggars. No more. There was no one to beg from.

The boy easily kept pace at my side. Just before the street curved sharply, I paused and looked back. The hospital sat like a squat blue bluff above a restless river of dark faces, scarves, wide-brimmed straw hats. Those familiar blue walls housed the only thing like a home I had in Haiti. There were hills behind the city, and mountains behind the hills. Centuries of unhappy Haitian history were compressed in a single local proverb, *Dèyè morne ginyin morne,* "Beyond the mountains, more mountains."

We got through the market-place mob without incident and left pavement behind. The muddy road narrowed and began to braid like a lazy old river. Soon enough, we faced a daunting maze of slippery filth-strewn paths. Cité Carton was built on landfill. The houses, if they could be dignified with that word, were fashioned of scraps of corrugated tin, scraps of wood, cardboard—thus, City of Cartons. The boundary of a yard might be marked with a few sticks driven into the ground. There was no potable water, no sewerage system. The ground was squishy, putrid jam. You didn't want to breathe through your nose, because the stench of human and animal waste was unbearable. You didn't want to breathe through your mouth, because flies were everywhere. You didn't want to breathe at all.

Adults looked at us—at me, really—with suspicion in their expressions, or with frank hostility, or with nothing at all. The children, all showing signs of severe malnutrition, reddish hair, distended bellies, looked curious or alarmed or, most depressingly, as devoid and incapable of emotion as some of the adults. When I decided we had come far enough, I slipped off my pack and slowly executed a 360-degree turn, so that everyone could see the big caduceus printed on the front of my T-shirt. I announced, in French, that I was from the Medical Social Complex hospital, gave my name, and told them why I had come. Georges waited

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until I was finished, then translated. No one appeared to find me very impressive. Then one small girl, ten, maybe twelve years old, beckoned urgently from around the corner of a hut. As I approached, she pointed to the open doorway. I stuck my head inside.

The hut consisted of a single room, about three meters to a side, with shaky walls of corrugated sheet tin and cardboard. In somebody's mind, a filmy sheet of plastic hanging against one wall turned what otherwise would've been only a hole into a legitimate window. Stacked against the rear wall were several flattened cardboard boxes covered with what must've appeared to be cabalistic markings to anybody who couldn't read, which was nine Haitians in ten—NO HOOK, 1 DOZ, C/#: 318, 7875/20, 3-2-31, MADE IN KOREA. In one corner, a small black cooking pot sat by a cold hearth made of stones and bits of cinder block. Some grimy plastic sandals in children's sizes were piled in the opposite corner. A sheet of cardboard was on the ground in the center of the room, and on the cardboard was a naked boy about four years old. His eyes and cheeks were sunken, his lips were bluish, and he was cold and clammy to the touch. He lay unconscious in a light-gray scum of his own watery stools. Even in Cité Carton, with its perennial dense fecal miasma, there must've been smells you could get used to, but cholera couldn't have been one of them.

The girl hovered in the doorway. I said, in Creole, "Is this your brother? Where is your mother and the rest of your family?" She looked puzzled, so I had Georges repeat what I'd said. He rattled it off like a machine gun. The girl tried to squirm away from the questions.

I heard a blur of voices from without. The girl suddenly vanished from the doorway, and Georges made an alarmed sound and glanced back over his shoulder at me. He looked sick with fear. I came out of the hut to find myself facing a solid line of sullen grown-ups. Georges stepped to my side, and I drew him behind me.

A withered old man dressed in a ratty suit a size too small for him said, in uncertain French, "Now you see everyone is sick, go away."

"I am from the hospital," I said.

"*I* am the doctor here," said the old man, "ever since the *loa* mounted me as I was a boy—" he grinned horribly at Georges, who was peeking around me "—like this one." He meant that he was the *houngan,* possessed by one of the wise old voodoo gods. You couldn't live in this country without hearing such stuff. "You do no good here. Go back," and he nodded toward the distant hills.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, "There is a child sick with cholera here. There have been two other cases since yesterday. Many people are going to die here if—"

"Many people always die here. It is because the people abandoned the

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loas. The *loas* send punishments. Go away now. Your medicine, nothing you have works here any longer."

"I have come from the hospital to learn how many people are sick here." I made myself speak calmly but earnestly and tried to project purposefulness, self-confidence, but not arrogance. "I have to know where you are getting your drinking water now."

"Everything is different now," said the *houngan*. "You have no power to help, or to stay."

Him I could have argued with all day, but not the machetes I suddenly noticed in the hands of several of the men standing with him. The *houngan* had already put me in my place; I had no authority here; these people looked perfectly willing to chop me down in broad daylight if I persisted. I indicated surrender with a nod, turned Georges and myself around, started us walking back the way we'd come. It wasn't until I had taken six or seven steps that I truly stopped expecting a blade to bite into the side of my neck. The fact remained that I was being shown out under guard. I did what tradition and history dictated, kept my manly head up, my noble gaze fixed on the horizon, fought the need to start crying from anger, frustration, and humiliation. Just like Lee at Appomattox.

No one threw anything harder than catcalls, but our escort stayed with us until our feet struck hard, rough pavement. Then the men stood around to watch us go and make sure we didn't sneak back. The *houngan* gave me a grin of pure hateful triumph. The girl who had summoned me to her baby brother's side called after us, softly, "*Bonsoir*," and started to wave, but someone struck her hand down.

It was a hot, grim slog back. Georges wasn't a talkative lad, and I wasn't in a talky mood, and just as well. He'd have got a complete education in swearing in English, and later his mother, who feared only God, would've repaid me with a complete education in bawling out in Creole and French. Those are fine languages for bawling out, but when you feel the need to capture the gist of a intolerable situation in a few words, or to sum up the character, ancestry, and destiny of some vile ignorant lowdown awful-smelling dog-kicking snake-sucking soft-brained syphilitic sack of skunk pus *voodoo doctor,* you can't beat the old Anglo-Saxonisms for savor.

Then I found myself thinking, not for the first or tenth or forty-seventh time, that three years' worth of my energy and ability was a respectable contribution, I could retire with honor intact now, go back to the U. S. of A., patch up things with my family somehow, start making something like a good living and living something like the good life. You could make yourself crazy this way. Lord knows, I'd never had any illusions about Haiti, but your usual run of idealistic young idiot, once having

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alienated great Doctor Dad and broken great Doctor Mom's heart by becoming a *physician's assistant*—not even a general practitioner!—would be satisfied to spend a year in one of the States' numerous, varied, and worsening hell-holes before moving on to a more genteel practice. Yours truly, however, had wanted, not a *job* in some piss-ant emergency room in the current murder capital of the U. S., but A Real Challenge, by God, nothing less than, nowhere else but, *the* hell-hole of the Western Hemisphere.

Great Doctor Mom had begun her last letter to me, *My Dear Son, The world will, eventually, break your heart.* In that same letter, she told me that she'd wired what she called my "mad money" to the American embassy in Port-au-Prince. "I'd sooner throw money down the toilet," she wrote, "than put it in Haitian banks. You can withdraw it any time you feel you've had enough and are ready to come home and lead a real life."

The money was still at the embassy. I thought about it as little as possible. You could make yourself crazy.

We got back to the hospital shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon. I was bone-tired, footsore, and mad enough to punch an archbishop. De Rossarieu had managed to get to sleep for about twenty minutes at midday. It left him looking a bit less red-eyed but even more uncombed. When I finished describing my visit to and ejection from Cité Carton, he said, "It is worse than I feared. But I do have some good news. Monsieur Bazile from the health ministry has made an appointment for this afternoon. I need you to go." I stifled a groan. More legwork. "Bazile thinks our only hope of getting medical supplies is to get them from the United States."

"The United States," I said, annoyedly lapsing into English, "is why we don't have what we need in the first place."

De Rossarieu understood English perfectly well and followed my lead. "Bazile thinks now is psychologically the right moment. The Americans are in a good mood about this Mars landing, and the war in Cuba seems to be going well for them."

"Well, that tells you about U. S. priorities. I don't think we can get squat. They don't even have airbases here. They fly all their missions out of Florida and Santo Domingo. Christ, I don't even think they have an ambassador here."

"They have an embassy and a *chargé*, at least. If I have to use my one American staff member to pry help out of the American embassy . . . "

"You're right." Of course he was right. "Where's this meeting supposed to take place?"

"In Independence Square. The health minister will meet you there himself."

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"I don't like that one bit," I said. "Shouldn't a legitimate health ministry have a real *office* somewhere?"

De Rossarieu heaved a great sigh. "What in Haiti is legitimate any more? Maybe he keeps his office in his hat."

An hour later, scrubbed clean of Cité Carton muck, dressed in my one decent suit of clothes, and still bone-tired and footsore, I set out on my bicycle for Independence Square. I pedaled part of the way, pushed the bike the rest. The going was slow; long stretches of pavement had disintegrated into a detritus of asphalt and gravel. The crowd had thinned away almost to nothing by the time I reached the plaza and sat down across from the statue of Toussaint L'Ouverture, hero of the 1791-1803 war for independence from France. Significantly, I thought, he had his back turned to the National Palace.

For the first time all day, for the first time in many days, I felt I was breathing relatively clean air. But of course. Here, as elsewhere, relatively clean air had become a commodity, and breathing it, a privilege of those who could afford it. The hills above the city were given over to upper-class suburbs, Pètionville and the like, now mostly, albeit unofficially, deserted. There was nothing left to plunder in Haiti, so there were no plunderers left, either—none who'd been good at it, anyway. With car doors locked, windows rolled up, eyes looking straight ahead, the last rich Haitian aristocrats had driven their expensive automobiles to the airport a final time and escaped to the south of France. The last poor Haitian aristocrats hung on meanly in their hillside palaces—you never saw them anywhere any more, or soldiers, uniformed policemen, or government officials, for that matter. From time to time, you heard somebody's name mentioned after the phrase "President of the Republic of Haiti" on the radio, saw a name after that title in some inconsequential newspaper story, but no one could tell you who he was, what he looked like, how much harm he was doing to the country.

No government, colonial, monarchical, democratic, dictatorial, had ever done Haiti any good. I had only to look around the plaza, the so-called Champs de Mars, to see signs of national dissolution. The National Palace was a lifeless pile of masonry with a forlorn air about it, a look of having been abandoned to ghosts. I could see windows with glass broken out, either by winds or vandals. Grass was growing through cracks in the pavement. The building looked as haunted as Sans Souci, old King Henri's palace in the north, built in 1813. I'd seen that on one of my few trips into the countryside. Except for Sans Souci and King Henri's nearby fortress, La Citadelle, and maybe a picturesque fishing village or two, there weren't lots of what you could call tourist attractions anywhere in Haiti. There was no woodland any more. Halfhearted reforestation efforts in the late twentieth century came to nothing; poor country folk, needful of fuel for cooking fires, cut down the trees faster than

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they could be replaced. Without the trees, erosion was widespread and rapid. Haitian rivers were vicious torrents. The whole western end of the island of Hispaniola was being washed into the sea. Almost the whole population of Haiti had already been washed into the slums of Port-au-Prince. This had been the richest colony in the world in the eighteenth century.

A once-elegant automobile came around the square and crept to a stop not far from where I sat. Both front doors opened, and out stepped two men wearing what had come down from the days of the old Tontons Macoute as the official badge of bogeymanhood, dark sunglasses. The driver stepped forward and asked my name. I told him. He was wearing a blue serge suit and an open-necked shirt and had a pistol stuck conspicuously in the waistband of his trousers. He said, almost in English, "I mass fris you." He ran his hands under my jacket, up my sides, knelt to feel along each leg from hip to ankle, stood up, stepped back, nodded. The whole procedure had taken four, five seconds. He took my bicycle around to the back of the car and stowed it in the trunk. His gaunt fellow bogeyman, looking like some cheap clothes filled with bones, opened a rear door for me. I started to get in. A heavyset man sat waiting in the back seat.

I hesitated. "Monsieur Bazile?"

"Of course." He spoke heavily accented English.

"From the health ministry?" I hoped against hope that there'd been some mistake. Bazile and his car and his two bogeymen looked about as official as a sawed-off shotgun.

"Of course. Come, get in."

I got in, and the car started to move. Bazile cocked his head slightly and seemed to listen to the motor for a second or two. Then he smiled at me.

"Doctor de Rossarieu," he said, "told me you have personally investigated the situation."

"I'm afraid it wasn't much of an investigation. The local *houngan* showed me out."

"Ah! The *loas* are here to stay! The Holy Church could not drive them out. Not even Bonne's New Haitian Order could do that." His smile got slier. "Not even your marines could do it."

"Knocking off Trinidad and Tobago is more the marines' speed." Lately, "my" marines, along with the rest of "my" armed forces, had been using Cuba for a target range.

"The American military," said Bazile, "may be our salvation. The American base at Santo Domingo will have the medical supplies we need. I have already been in touch with the *chargé d'affaires* at your embassy, and he has cabled Washington."

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I gave him a tight smile. "It's no embassy of mine."

"Do you dislike your own countrymen?"

"These particular countrymen always look like they were carved out of brie."

That obviously made no sense whatever to him. I opened my mouth to offer some sort of explanation, but he said, "You are a young and impatient man." His voice became conspiratorial. "Suffer these embassy people for a while, my friend. Transfers of money and medical supplies present everyone with certain opportunities."

I stared at him. He became seriously preoccupied with the back of his driver's head. We rode in silence for a time, then turned onto the driveway of a mansion.

Bazile smiled as his men got out to open the doors for us. Disgruntled, I said, "Nice place you have here."

His smile widened into a grin. "Oh, no, this is one of the houses kept by the American foreign-service people."

"Don't they have a compound any more?"

"Only the marines stay there now," he said. "It isn't nearly as nice as this. If you are thinking of buying a home in Haiti, now is the time."

"You wouldn't by any chance be in the real-estate business, would you?"

"I am in every kind of business there is."

I'll bet, I thought.

Inside, the place had a half-moved-into or -out-of look, but it was cool and pleasant-smelling. Waiting to receive us there were two creatures from another world, male and female. The lightness of their skin and hair was offset by dark clothing; their pale, almost translucent faces and hands seemed to shimmer. I couldn't imagine their having ever been out in the Haitian sun, and wondered what they might do if they were exposed to it. Crumble like Dracula, maybe, flake away to nothing. Maybe melt like cheese. I'd never seen these people before, and yet I had. They could've been clones of everyone who'd worked at the embassy before them. Bazile made the introductions. The man, Fraser, was the *chargé*. The woman's name was Britton. No one bothered to say what her job was; she could have been the embassy secretary or Fraser's lady friend.

Bazile was expansive. "I have heard it on the radio!" he gushed to Fraser. "Americans on Mars! It is a magnificent accomplishment! You must be very proud of your countrymen!"

Fraser beamed as if his brains and his personal fortune were responsible for the feat. Britton said, "Yes, very proud." Before I could draw a breath to mention cholera, Fraser suggested that we go see if there were

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anything new about the landing on television, and the four of us drifted into a sitting room.

What I'd always called the approved-news channel was running videotape from Mars. Bazile and the two embassy people were enthralled. I fretted and waited for the right instant to bring them down to earth.

"Still," Bazile said, "it strikes me as most strange, to send men all that way to Mars with only other men to look at and talk to for so long."

"Maybe they're all homos up there," I growled.

Everybody looked at me in surprise.

"The president hates homos," I said. "Heard him say so in a speech. Probably spend billions to send all those HIV-positives someplace far away. Maybe even to Mars."

Fraser and Britton were becoming unhappier with me by the second, but Bazile evidently decided that this was authentic American humor, the fabled leg-pulling variety, for he threw back his head and gave a hearty laugh.

"Still," he said, dabbing at a tear of mirth with one thick finger, "it cannot be cost-effective." He lowered his hand from his face and cocked his thumb; his finger became the barrel of a gun. "There are less expensive ways of dealing with the problem."

I thought that this might be authentic bogeyman humor, the leg-breaking kind, so I chuckled appreciatively. Then I said, "Now that we've all seen Mars and shared a laugh or two, let's talk about a problem brewing in the Cité Carton section of Cité Soleil."

"Ah!" said Bazile. "That terrible place! But when has it not been so?"

"There're people sick with cholera there," I said, "and I can't get near them. I got chased out this morning by a witch doctor and some boys with machetes."

"Chased out of the slums, for Heaven's sake," said Britton.

"One of those sanitation-related diseases, isn't it?" said Fraser. I didn't quite believe I'd heard either of them say what they'd just said, and my disbelief must have looked like stupidity or inattention or some such to him, for he added, as if reminding me of the topic of discussion, "Cholera."

"Yes," I said, "yes. People in Cité Carton get their water elsewhere and lug it in, or buy it from water-sellers who lug it part of the way in. The closest functioning pumps are miles away. Some of that water may be contaminated at the source. People are out making tests now. We—"

"What do you suppose the problem is," said Fraser mildly, "old pipes?"

Bazile frowned. "If it is old pipes, then it's a matter for the public works ministry—"

I was beginning to feel desperate. "Our main effort," I said, "is aimed at locating and cutting the source of the contaminated water, but we've

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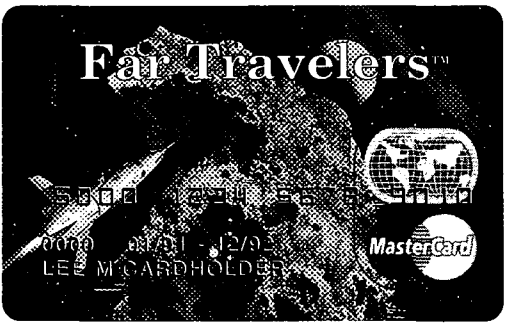

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also got sick people who need treatment. We need tetracycline if we can get it, streptomycin or chloramphenicol—"

"Have you asked the Albert Schweitzer Hospital," Britton said, "and the Baptist mission?"

"They have nothing to spare. Nobody has anything to spare."

She put on a thoughtful expression. "I suppose this must make you long to have the World Health Organization back."

I bit off a reply to the effect that it sure hadn't been me who'd wished bankruptcy on the WHO. With the monied nations not paying their club dues, the United Nations had become a meeting hall for impoverished handwringers. The U. S. was spending every cent on things that either went boom or else went to Mars. The world's economic giants, such as they were, were so tight they squeaked. Countries like Haiti, Grenada, Burundi, and Nepal couldn't take up the slack.

I looked directly at her and said, "I'd settle for a planeload of antibiotics and I-V packs."

"I'm sorry," said Fraser, "I'm not sure what you think we can do."

"Haiti doesn't have the resources, but the United States still does."

"I see." His expression couldn't have been blander. "Is it bad?"

"Mister Fraser," I said, "I don't know what you think cholera is, but I'm here to tell you, it's virulent, nasty, and about as disgusting a disease as it's possible for humans to die of. God only knows how many infected people there are in Port-au-Prince right now, but every one of them's got a gutful of cholera bacteria. The bacteria produce toxins that disrupt the normal exchange of water and salts between the intestine and body tissues. Unabsorbed water and salts are eliminated in a profuse, continuous, watery diarrhea."

Britton crinkled her nose in disgust and said, "*Please,*" and her soulmate looked annoyed and said, "Really, now." Bazile just looked interested.

I kept talking. "Cholera kills by dehydration. You want to drink a lot of water, but drinking water doesn't help. It just prolongs the diarrhea. Only intravenous replacement of fluids does the trick. And that's only part of the trick. The bacteria pass out of the body in stools, contaminate water and food, somebody comes along and ingests—"

"*Stop it!*" Fraser snapped, seizing my arm. We glared at each other for a second, and then I jerked away. He straightened his cuff, smiled icily, said, "There's nothing to be done for it. I've already discussed the matter with my government, but—" He shrugged.

Bazile looked put out. "It is too bad."

"Surely," I said, "if you explained the situation to them—"

"I'm sorry," said Fraser.

"There're two *million* people here!"

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"It wouldn't matter if there were *ten* million. Now it's cholera. Last time, it was, ah—"

"Hepatitis."

"And *next* time, what will it be next time?" His expression was pitying. "Someone should explain the situation to *you*. Haiti's a filthy rathole, it's *been* a filthy rathole ever since these niggers threw the French out." Bazile didn't react to that; he was still too put out with Washington to mind a mere racial slur. "When you throw money down a rathole, you throw it away, it's gone forever. Nobody has money to throw away these days. Even if they did, you think they'd give a damn about Haiti? *Haitians* don't even give a damn any more. You can hardly find a government in this place any more, because there's nothing to govern!"

"You're telling me," I said, "the United States can get men from the Earth to Mars but can't get a planeload of medical supplies from Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince?"

He gestured toward the television screen, which was filled with images of space-suited individuals moving jerkily across a rock-littered landscape. "There," he said, "is the future. That's our next home."

"When do the folks from Cité Carton get to move in?"

He regarded me sourly. "If you look down all the time, you never see the stars."

"While you're busy looking up," I said, "you may be sinking in your own crap."

"My advice to you is, take a vacation. No one should *want* to be here. I know *I* don't," and with that he gave Britton a look, and the two of them turned neatly and glided away, possibly to go make love on a bed of ice cubes, then lie around sucking marrow from the thigh bones of parboiled infants. The interview was concluded.

Bazile was philosophical as we rode back to Independence Square. "Perhaps next time," he said, "everybody will get what he wants."

"Haiti can't get the time of day. You heard what he said. There's not going to be a next time."

"*Dèyè morne ginyin morne,*" he intoned.

"I know that proverb. Beyond every mountain, more mountains."

"You are not a Haitian," he said. "You do not read enough into it. It means not only that hardship follows hardship, but also that there is always hope. And next time, you and I will still be here, and that man back there will be back in America—"

"And someone just like him will have taken his place. Beyond every asshole, more assholes."

Bazile laughed. "Remember what I said about learning to do business with people you dislike. I can tell that you dislike me. Yet if I told you

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I know a few ways *around* the American government to these precious medical supplies—"

"Can we do business, monsieur, you and I?"

He looked good-naturedly doubtful. "I did say that these are *precious* medical supplies."

I said, "I have some money waiting for me at the American embassy."

"Oh?"

"How much tetracycline could I get for the price of a plane ticket to the States?"

He laughed again. "I love American humor," he said.

It was early evening when I stepped out of Bazile's car at Independence Square and sundown when I got back to the hospital. Dr. de Rossarieu accepted the news of my second failure of the day with a sort of dreamy calm. I figured his unfocused equanimity put him half-ahead of me; I was focused but upset. He told me to go change, wake Velmont, get back as soon as possible. Two more bluish, vomiting, helplessly shitting people had been brought in from Cité Carton, and the word was that still other people *weren't* being brought in. The *loas* were sending another punishment. We'd just have to do the best we could. An emergency meeting with people from the Albert Schweitzer Hospital and the Baptist mission was scheduled for nine P.M.. Someone claimed to have access to the last functioning police precinct in Port-au-Prince. De Rossarieu opined that the next time I went into Cité Carton, I'd have backup. The thought chilled me. It sounded like a sure-fire way to touch off a turf war between men with machetes and men wearing dark sunglasses. It did seem that bogeymen were all the government the country had at the moment.

I staggered out back to my room. Velmont was already awake. He sat on the edge of his bed and watched me work my shoes off my poor burning feet. There was American music on the radio. The signal from Miami was as strong and steady as it had been that morning, but the volume was turned down, and we could hear our stomachs growl at each other across the room.

"We need to eat," he said.

"A day like today," I said, "eating's just about the last thing I want to do."

"I didn't say anything about *wanting* to eat. I said, we *need* to eat."

"Not hungry. Anyway, there isn't time. The doc's still on his feet in the ward."

He started looking around for his socks. I hung up my good clothes, put on my not-so-good clothes, started to put on my shoes. I said to him, "Got anything to drink?"

"Maybe."

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My eyes were stinging. I wouldn't let myself cry, wouldn't, but a sob escaped, I couldn't stop it, it just escaped.

"Velmont," I gasped, "I feel, I feel like we're all here at the bottom of a mountain, trying to wave off an avalanche."

"I know the feeling."

The American music stopped, and the voice from the radio said that we would now hear highlights of the speech the president had made that morning. I switched off the radio in a fury.

"I don't want to hear another word about it," I said. "I don't want to hear another goddamn word about what a great moment it is. I don't want to hear how long it took to get men to Mars, and I *especially* goddamn don't want to hear how much it cost." I was panting, clutching one shoe, still fighting tears. "Know why I can't just give up here and go back to the States?"

Velmont shrugged and grinned. "You're a fugitive from American justice?" He was taking me seriously, in his own way. He was a good sort. He'd been doing all right in Montreal, where there was a Haitian community of about seventy thousand people. Then one day he'd found himself thinking long and hard about there being more Haitian physicians and nurses in Montreal than there were in all of Haiti. The next thing he knew, he was on a plane flying south.

"I imagine," I said, "I imagine what a shock it'd be to step on the plane *here,* step off *there.* Probably be even more of a shock than when I stepped off here. I imagine I get back to the States. Parts of it are still good places, the people are sleek and live so well. I imagine I'm walking around, marveling at how wonderful everything is. Then I hear somebody complain, it's just the least little thing, nothing good on TV tonight, beer's not cold enough, I don't know, but there's this *sound* in the back of my head like piano wire snapping, and I just start killing everybody, family, friends, total strangers. Everybody."

Neither of us spoke for several seconds.

Then he said, "It's not everybody's fault."

"It's *somebody's* fault."

"Well, killing everybody in the United States wouldn't fix Haiti. Won't even fix the United States. They have slums there, too."

"Not like here. Not like the City of Cartons."

Velmont gave me a look of friendly exasperation. "A slum's a slum. And, *tout' homme ce l'homme.* Every man is Man. Every woman, too. The U. S.'s bigger than Haiti. It's just taking them *longer* to run out of everything and start living in cartons."

We looked at each other for a long moment. Finally, I said, "You mentioned something about a drink."

"No, you did, but what the hey."

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He opened his trunk and pulled out a bottle of Haitian rum, *clairin*, stuff so raw it could bring your dead ancestors back to life. He poured two glasses, gave one to me. We saluted each other, and I was about to take a sip when I saw him hesitate.

"A toast?" I said.

He raised his glass. "Fuck men on Mars," he said.

Our glasses touched.●

THE TWO CULTURES

for John Swope

The scientist says
that all that we know exploded
from an inscrutable spark.
The universe swelled like a bubble.
Galaxies clumped and swirled.
Planets danced around a yellow sun.
Rain scattered across breeding seas.
The scientist says
that the spark that made the stars
made us.

The artist asks
that we pause some night beside the water
and feel the restless sky teaching
the stars within us.
There is only one commandment:
create, create.
That's why we cling to each other
and make new worlds with our bodies.
The artist asks only
that we honor the spark.

—James Patrick Kelly

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FIFTY MORE WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ORGASM

by Maggie Flinn

"50 More Ways to Improve Your Orgasm" is a sequel, of sorts, to Pat Cadigan's earlier tale, "50 Ways to Improve Your Orgasm" (April 1992). While this story was the author's third sale, it is her first story to appear in print.

Personal Log
Day One

You'd think at least they could have gotten the body upholstery right. If this is the Artifact Division's idea of accuracy, I guess I ought to be thankful I got assigned to the Human Framework Regeneracy Program. Yeah, I'm still bitching that I didn't get my first choice. I know, this way I get to see all sorts of artifacts, up close and for real, but still, I placed high enough. Within the top half percent of the class, I should have gotten my first choice.

But so far, second choice ain't bad at all. I really am not complaining. Except for the upholstery mistake. Do you have any idea what it's like to arrive back in time, in human form (yes, that's what I said, in human form—they finally grew one good enough for a mind-body personality overlay and yours truly got it), wearing entirely the wrong upholstery? Well, for the record, let me tell you what it's like—embarrassing, that's what. There I was, all in black leather (remember to reference tanned animal hides) with studs (reference decorative component to upholstery) and chains and boots up to my thighs, at the doorstep. (The time-space travel distortion wasn't anywhere near as bad as I'd been led to believe, by the way.) But at least it was the right doorstep.

You should have seen her face, when she opened the door and saw me

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standing there. Mrs. Brown they call her to her face. She's such a nice lady. No wonder they honor her with the title Madam behind her back. She never made any comment at all about the clothes. She just invited me in to dinner, as nice as you please. And she offered me a job, just like that.

I really didn't think it was going to be so easy. I thought I'd at least have to wander around a while first, before I found an appropriate study situation. Just goes to show you, someone in the Travel and Transport Division knows what they're doing. They said they'd send me to a location that would be suitable for Madam Professor Alta's protocol. They were right. Artifacts could take some lessons from them.

I do indeed seem to be in a place called London, Earth, and the time seems right, although I haven't had the chance yet to find out the exact year. It smells absolutely *awful*, but it is warm outside, and I've heard some people comment on how mild the summer is, so it looks as though I'm where and when I'm supposed to be. Never having done any field work at all, let alone a mind-body personality overlay, maybe I'm overreacting to the upholstery mistake, I don't know. But these new clothes (reference: upholstery seems to be confined as a term for support structures, which they generally refer to as furniture; materials covering the human body are generally referred to as clothing, or clothes) are outrageous.

They have these things called corsets, that only the female of the species have to wear. Thank the Universal Oneness, that in this house at least, they don't have to wear them very *much*. But the layers and types (remember to reference silk, vermifuge excretory product) of materials aren't so bad. And they do have the prettiest decorative touches (remember to try to reference lace).

Mrs. Brown had Fanny help me out with all of it. We were introduced before dinner, after she invited me in off the doorstep. She said it wouldn't do for me to show up at dinner dressed as I was. It was Fanny who brought me the appropriate clothing and instructed me in its placement. And I thought getting on all that leather had been difficult. Just try a corset some time, I dare you.

She told me her given name was Frances Hill and that she was from a small village near Liverpool in a place called Lancashire. I gather it's quite different from here. She is a very sweet person. And, I suspect, by human standards, quite pretty. She has lovely deep red hair, auburn she calls it, and skin like pearls (reference indigenous mollusk irritation product, used for ornamentation). I also gather that, by human standards, according to Fanny and Mrs. Brown at least, the Regeneration Team did a bang-up job on this unit.

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And while I'm giving credit where credit is due, Fanny has been one helpful human. I think she's going to be of paramount importance in my research, if tonight's activities were any indication. I do wish that Madam Professor Alta could meet her. I know she'll see the holoprints, but it won't be the same.

Speaking of Madam Professor Alta, I think I'm in trouble. I know she told me that she personally selected me for this expedition—that she really wanted to go herself. But she explained that, since she's chairing the 205th InterGalactic Orgasm Conference, she just couldn't spare the time for any more basic field research this decade. So here's my chance. To validate her work. To go down in academic history as the first to undergo mind-body overlay into a regenerated human. To get a start on forging my *own* career. How could I refuse?

But I forgot to bring a copy of the handbook with me! Can you *believe* it? Thank the Universal Oneness that I can remember some of it. I think. I did read her "50 Ways to Improve Your Orgasm" in Intro to Alien Concepts of the Orgasm at University, of course, like everyone else, but since I was planning on going into Artifacts, I only focused on that one little subsection on appliances and the like. I figured that once I got here, I could thoroughly read the whole thing. And I *forgot* it! And all her other publications on the subject. I had them all packed up and ready to go, and I forgot them. I think it was getting into all that leather upholstery that did it. I mean, if you were zipping and buckling yourself into all that stuff, I don't think *your* mind would be on remembering to take your thesis advisor's life's works with *you*, either. But then, you're really just a data holder anyway, what would you know?

But I have to tell *someone* about what Fanny's been teaching me. I know I've got it all on the holoprints, but Madam Professor Alta did tell me to take lots of notes, and not to rely too much on technology. Holoprints do not a thesis make, she said. I think she's right on that one.

Which brings me back to Fanny. During dinner (which was quite delicious, by the way—see Appendix A for full description), she and Mrs. Brown explained that the other residents of the establishment were otherwise engaged, but that I could meet them tomorrow, probably some time in the early afternoon. Fanny particularly wanted me to meet another female of the species she called Phoebe. She explained that Phoebe had been very instrumental in helping her in her career. Later, after dinner, Fanny taught *me* what she said that Phoebe had taught *her*. Somehow, I don't think the holoprint is going to convey the essence of the experience.

I've got to tell you, the experience adds a whole new dimension to

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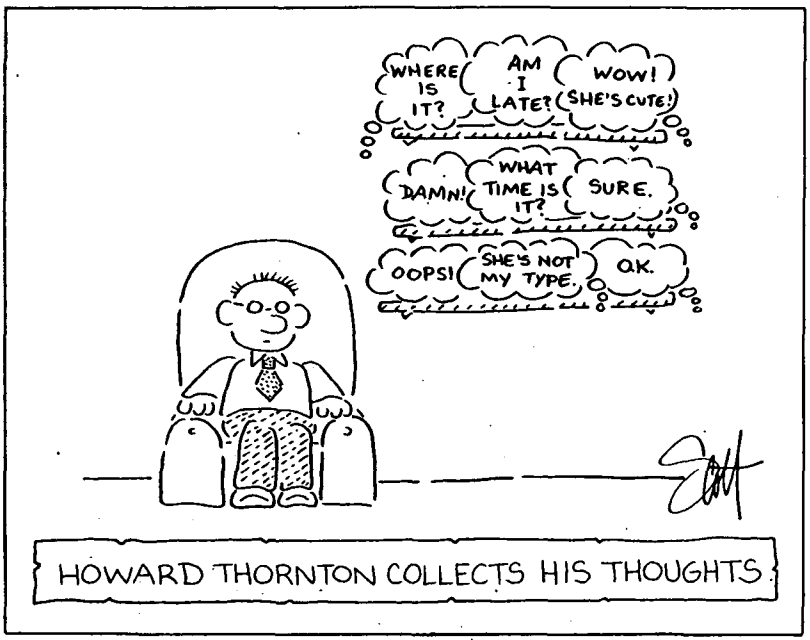
Madam Professor Alta's definition of "orgasm as a concept and artifact." Was she ever right to push funding of the Human Framework Regeneracy Program. I may have forgotten to bring her handbook with me, but I do know the 51st way—get a human body! There's nothing like doing field work with the right *equipment.* Or having an instructor like Fanny in how to *use* the right equipment.

Well, it's been a long day. It's time to give this human body some sleep. It seems to be feeling what they call "tired." All in all, it's been a pretty momentous first day of field work, and Fanny tells me tomorrow will be a "big day." She's going to introduce me to Phoebe and the rest of the women in the afternoon, and to some of the males of the species in the evening. Fanny says that if I thought *tonight's* investigations were revealing, I'll have even *more* to record tomorrow. I can't wait!

And I'm going to have to get busy on writing a grant proposal. This project only gives me a week here. Baseline provisional investigation only is all the initial protocol calls for. I can tell already that I'm going to need to stay longer. *Much* longer. Months, maybe years. There is definitely enough here for my thesis work, and more. I think I've even got a title already, that is, if Madam Professor Alta approves. I'd like to call it "50 More Ways To Improve Your Orgasm." I hope she'll like it!●



HOWARD THORNTON COLLECTS HIS THOUGHTS

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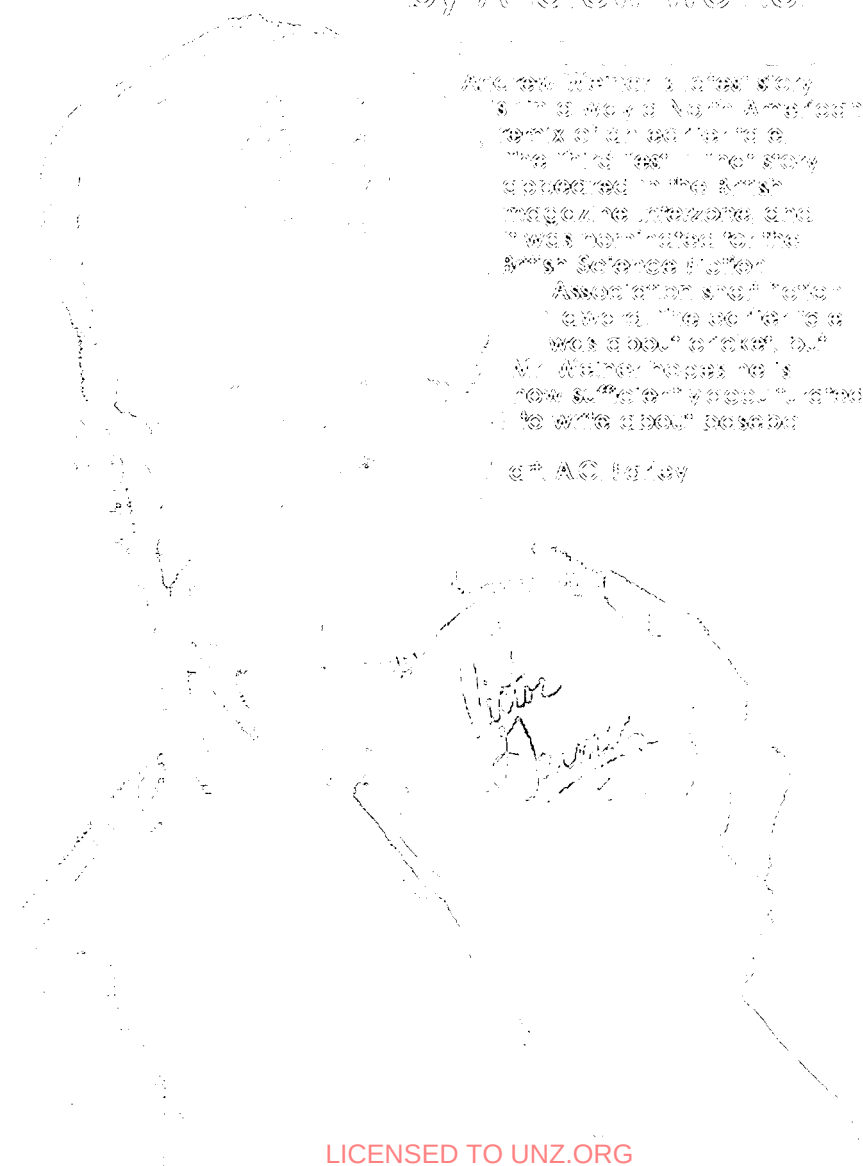
STREAK

by Arrow Worker



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1.

Victor Garmez was playing centerfield the day the aliens came.

Last season, back in Double-A ball, he had mostly played left field. The Chiefs had started him there, too. But just a few weeks into the season there had been a rash of injuries on the major league team, and the regular centerfielder, Mel Hewlett, had been dispatched to Toronto to join The Show.

Hewlett had been batting only .251 at the time, Garmez .305. But Hewlett was management's blue-eyed boy, a first-round pick in the college draft. Garmez was just another Dominican. Or so he imagined they thought of him, when they thought of him at all.

Garmez did not miss Hewlett. But he did envy him, all the more so as the iron grey sky over Syracuse opened up at the top of the third inning and the rain began to fall in torrents. Playing deep, he was soaked through by the time he made it back to the dugout.

They didn't get wet, up in Toronto. They just closed the roof on the dome.

In the dressing room, some of the players had resumed their endless card games. Others were watching daytime TV on the small monitor perched on top of one of the lockers. Garmez sat down to watch with them. He needed to improve his English.

The actors in the TV show were glossy and well-dressed and lived in palace-like homes. You never saw such people or such homes back in the Dominican Republic. Garmez's mother, along with his three sisters, lived in a two-room shack.

One day, though, he would make it to the big leagues, and build them a new house. If he didn't catch pneumonia and die first, this ghastly wet and chilly April.

"There's something you should know, Jill," a glossy, well-dressed man with fair wavy hair, who looked just a little like Mel Hewlett, was telling a glossy, well-dressed woman. And then, abruptly, the picture blanked.

"We interrupt this broadcast," said an authoritative sounding voice, "to bring you this special bulletin."

War, Garmez thought. These Yankees have got themselves in another war. Or someone shot their president. . . .

The face of a newscaster filled the screen. At first glance, he looked liked any other newscaster: dignified, sober, serious. But there was something wild about his eyes.

"Aliens," said the newscaster, "extraterrestial visitors to our planet from another part of the galaxy, are currently meeting with world leaders in closed session at the United Nations in New York. We take you now to Diane Kendrick at the UN Plaza. Are you there, Diane?"

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2.

Ken Brady stared in horror at his managing editor.

"You're assigning me *where?*"

"You heard me," Hugh Vernon said. "Sports desk."

"But I'm a science writer. I don't know anything about sports."

"And they don't know shit about science. I want you on the Garmez story."

"Garmez?"

Vernon looked at Brady with a mixture of scorn and awe.

"You don't know? You really don't know?"

"I've been doing stories on the aliens," Brady said. "Who's Garmez?"

"Victor Garmez," Vernon said. "Plays left field for the Blue Jays. Got called up from Triple-A in April as a backup. Got into a game and went 3-for-4. They kept him on the team and he kept on hitting. He's now hit safely in fifty-one consecutive games. . . ."

"And?"

"Fifty-one games," Vernon repeated. "Six more to get past Joe DiMaggio. That name ring any bells for you?"

"Sure. Wasn't there a song about him?"

"DiMaggio set the record for a hitting streak in 1941. No one else has even come close. Until this kid from the Dominican Republic."

"And this is a big deal?"

"A big deal?" Vernon echoed. "The greatest accomplishment in the history of baseball is on the line. I think you could say that was a big deal."

"Okay," Brady said. "But what does it have to do with me?"

"I want a think piece on probability theory. What are the odds against a streak like this? Baseball fans eat up this statistical crap. I need two thousand words for Saturday. Front page of the sports section."

"What's so special about Saturday?"

"Jays finish up their home stand. And Garmez goes for number fifty-seven. Assuming he gets that far."

"And if he doesn't?"

Vernon shrugged. "We'll run it on the science page."

"I was supposed to finish this piece on the aliens."

"Screw the aliens," Vernon said. "The aliens are boring. *This* is the big story."

3.

Boring. While Brady did not personally agree with his assessment, he

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could see how interest in the aliens might have begun to wear a little thin.

Following their meeting with world leaders, and a single, carefully orchestrated press conference, the aliens had been keeping a studiously low profile. They were here, they claimed, strictly in a touristic capacity. They wished only to obtain the requisite visas to come and go as they liked, along with a supply of native currencies. In exchange for this they had offered certain philosophical constructs and technological devices. Details of their offerings had not yet been revealed, but apparently the deal had been satisfactory to all concerned.

Afterward the aliens had flitted here, there, everywhere. They had been sighted buying jewelry at Tiffany's in New York, shopping for native art in Manila, dining on caviar in Moscow, observing the work of the Zurich sanitation department. There had even been reports, still unconfirmed, of aliens seen in Montreal, eating smoked meat, although so far none had been spotted in Toronto.

At their one press conference, the aliens had not been terribly forthcoming. They had declined to identify their planet of origin. Neither would they discuss the technology that had powered their ship. As to the nature of their own society, they offered only the barest clues. And they declined to be drawn into comment on Earthly ideological and religious squabbles.

It was not surprising that the aliens were evasive on these issues. But it made for rather thin gruel when you had to write background pieces on them. Brady was in some ways relieved to lay down the burden of speculating endlessly on the basis of little or no data. Even to have to write about *baseball,* of all things, a game about which he knew almost nothing and cared less.

4.

"Garmez, yeah," said the hitting coach. "I expected good things of him, you know. But not *this* good."

"He didn't make the team in spring training," Brady said.

"Only just came up from Double-A. We thought he needed more seasoning. Still does, to tell you the truth. But when he's hitting like that . . . I mean, when you're hot, you're hot, right?"

"Right," Brady said.

"Garmez, he's a good little hitter. Reminds me of Wade Boggs."

"Wade Boggs never hit in fifty-one consecutive games."

The coach shrugged. "Streaks," he said. "I never understood them. I mean, not to take anything away from Garmez, but he's had some real

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luck along the way. Back around game twelve, he hits this little looper and it just drops in because the right fielder plays it too deep. Could have been scored an error, but they give him the hit. Another time he hits a chopper back to the mound and legs it out to first base. The umpire says safe, but it looks awfully close. Take away those hits and there's no streak, just a guy having a real good season."

"DiMaggio had some luck, too," Brady said. "From what I've read, there were a couple of very close judgment calls."

"Were there? Maybe that's true. But you know, I remember seeing DiMaggio when I was a kid. He was a giant, a real giant. . . . It's some strange kind of world where some green kid can come this close to topping DiMaggio. But don't print that, okay? The line around here is, we're right behind him."

5.

Victor Garmez was tall and thin, with mournful eyes and a wispy moustache. According to team records, he had just turned twenty-two.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said. "Nothing like this ever happened to me before. Once I went eleven, maybe twelve games in winter ball. But fifty-one? It's crazy."

He spoke quietly, shyly. His vocabulary was quite good, but his accent was thick, and Brady had to strain to understand him.

"I guess you never expected anything like this to happen."

"Expected? I never expected to *be* here. It was a fluky thing, you know. One guy breaks an ankle, another guy gets the flu, another one runs into the wall trying to catch a ball and throws out his shoulder—" Garmez allowed himself a brief smile at the fate of Mel Hewlett "—no chance of catching it, he's just hotdogging. So they got to call me."

"You must have been pleased when you got the call."

"Stunned, more like. One minute I'm watching TV and they're talking about these aliens. And then the manager comes in and tells me to pack because I'm going to The Show. Between the aliens and The Show, my head was spinning so fast I thought it was going to fall off."

Garmez was cradling a bat in his arms, waiting to take batting practice. As they watched, the man in the batting cage smashed a home run ball into the upper deck. He turned, grinning broadly, and caught sight of Garmez and the journalist. The grin turned to a scowl.

"That guy," Garmez said. "Two million dollars a year. Cleanup hitter, he's supposed to be. And you know how many RBIs he hit in April? Three."

A week ago, Brady would not have known what an RBI was. Now,

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after studying the sacred texts of sabermetrics, he knew all too well. At night, when he closed his eyes, all he saw were tables of names and numbers.

"They hate me," Garmez said. "All these guys. Because I'm showing them up. Me and a couple of others, we're carrying this team."

He ran his hand along his bat.

"That bat," Brady said. "It that the one you've been using? Kind of a lucky bat?"

Garmez shook his head. "I've used five, six different bats since I came up. A lot of guys, they got lucky bats and lucky socks and lucky ninja turtles, all kinds of lucky crap. But I don't believe in that stuff. What happens to me out there, it's down to me. And God."

"You think God is helping you?"

"I don't know. Maybe so." Garmez's voice trailed down to a whisper. "It's kind of hard to explain it any other way."

"How does it feel, taking on a legend like Joe DiMaggio?"

"I never heard too much about DiMaggio. Married Marilyn Monroe, right? They say he was a hell of a ballplayer."

"You think you're going all the way?" Brady asked.

"I know it. You see, it's like they say: when you're hot, you're hot."

"Yes," Brady said. "Like they say."

They shook hands, and Garmez headed off to the batting cage. Then he turned back. "Hey," he said. "Maybe I get to marry a movie star, too."

"Yeah," Brady said. "Maybe you do."

6.

When you're hot, you're hot.

Victor Garmez believed that. So did his batting coach. So did a lot of other people. And certainly it sounded plausible: the more you succeeded, the more confident you felt, and the better you did next time up.

The only problem, Brady thought, was that it wasn't true. Not in baseball or any other sport. He had pored over the studies, and they all pointed to the same conclusion.

There was a Stanford psychologist who had studied the Philadelphia 76ers basketball team, tracking every basket for more than a season. He found that the probability of making a second basket did *not* rise after a successful shot. The number of baskets made in succession was no greater than you would predict on the basis of the laws of chance. If your chance of making each basket was one in two, for example, you would get five baskets in a row, on average, once in thirty-two sequences.

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Longer runs occurred, but there was no mystery to them. A more talented basketball player might shoot at, say, a 0.6 probability of success each time out. He would get five in a row about once every thirteen sequences.

The same applied to baseball. There was almost no statistic in the game, no sequence of wins or losses or hits or strikeouts, that went beyond the frequency predicted by the laws of chance. There was no "hot" or "cold" about it: only skill intermeshing with the dance of probabilities.

Brady could have told Garmez this. But Garmez would not have believed it. No athlete would. No sports fan, either. People didn't seem able to think in probabilistic terms. They saw patterns emerging from the random flux of existence, and they rushed to impose meaning on them, to spin tales of heroism and villainy, or to look for the hand of God.

No, Garmez would not have believed it. No more than Brady's readers were going to believe it.

Besides, there *was* one exception to the rule. One gigantic, spooky exception: DiMaggio's fifty-six game hitting streak. A sequence of events, as the biologist and baseball fan Stephen Jay Gould had once observed, "*so many standard deviations above the expected distribution that it should not have occurred at all . . . the most extraordinary thing that ever happened in American sports.*"

Like DiMaggio, Victor Garmez was heading off the probabilistic map. And no one could predict where he might end up.

7.

Brady had Saturday off. He rose early and picked up the newspaper from his front step. His own article was on the front page of the sports section. Obviously Garmez had come through with hit number fifty-six the night before.

Brady glanced briefly at his work, then tossed it aside. It was solid stuff, but he wasn't really satisfied with it. For all his research, he had finally been unable to penetrate the mystery of Garmez's streak.

Garmez would be going for number fifty-seven that afternoon. Fame and fortune—and perhaps the lifelong endorsement contract with the ketchup manufacturer that had finally eluded DiMaggio—beckoned.

Brady had liked the shy young Dominican, and wished him well. But he had no interest in seeing the game. Besides, he was supposed to meet Janice, his fiancée, at the Eaton Centre shopping mall to select a china pattern for her forthcoming bridal shower. Janice believed in doing things properly.

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8.

Brady was in the Eaton's china department with Janice when he spotted the alien over in housewares, examining a Eurostyle toaster.

The alien in housewares looked exactly like all the other aliens Brady had seen on TV. He looked remarkably humanoid, with only his exceptional tallness and thinness—all the aliens were more or less seven feet tall—calling attention to his alien nature.

This was, to Brady's knowledge, the first alien to be seen in Toronto. He found a store phone and called Hugh Vernon to explain the situation.

"You want me to follow him?"

"Can't hurt," Vernon said. "First person report on an alien shopping spree. What's he bought so far?"

Brady craned his head to see the alien at the cash desk.

"Looks like a non-stick frying pan."

"Jeez," Vernon said. "This is already sounding like a real thriller. But stay with it, you never know."

Abandoning Janice to select the china pattern, Brady tailed the alien out of the department store and into the mall proper. The alien led him into W.H. Smith's, a bookseller. Like all the stores in the mall, it was nearly empty this beautiful mid-June day. Half the population of the city had headed out for their cottages. The rest were probably glued to their TV sets, watching Victor Garmez go for hit number fifty-seven.

The alien browsed for some time at the magazine racks, at first flipping through the car magazines, then becoming engrossed in *Playboy*. Brady wondered whether the alien might be homesick for his own large-breasted alien wife, back home on Arcturus 3 or wherever it was that they had come from.

As far as anyone knew, there were no alien women on Earth. Or at least, all the aliens looked the same, and the general assumption was that they were male, although that assumption could have been quite unfounded. So far, none had been publicly forthcoming about their sexual natures, despite several multi-million dollar offers for syndicated rights to such disclosures. Really, very little was known about the aliens.

Finally the alien left the store and headed for the escalator, making his way down to the lowest level. Brady realized that the alien was heading for the subway station. He followed the alien to the southbound platform. A train pulled up, and the alien got on. Brady got into the next car.

The alien disembarked at Union Station. After exiting the subway, he stood for a moment, apparently confused.

Brady seized his opportunity. "Need some help?" he said.

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"Thank you, yes. Which way is the SkyDome?" The alien spoke a fluent, accentless English.

"It's this way," Brady said, pointing. "I'm going there myself, I'll show you."

"That would be appreciated," the alien said. He was still holding the Eaton's shopping bag containing his non-stick frying pan.

"You're interested in baseball?"

"Very much so," said the alien. "In fact, you might describe this as the highpoint of our visit."

9.

Aliens. Just when everything was going so well, some *aliens* had to come along and screw everything up.

Garmez got the story from Mel Hewlett soon after arriving at the ballpark. Earlier that week, the Canadian government had booked a block of tickets for the aliens, along with assorted federal, provincial, and city politicians. It was supposed to be kept secret until game time, for security reasons. But Hewlett had got the word from a secretary in the front office, and he seemed delighted to pass it on to Garmez.

"Why would aliens want to see a baseball game?"

"I don't know, Vic," Hewlett said, grinning. Garmez hated being called "Vic," as Hewlett well knew. "Maybe they're here to see *you*. Maybe your fame has spread throughout the galaxy."

Garmez had been feeling excited when he arrived at the stadium. It had been a pleasant excitement, full of anticipation. Now it turned into a dull agitation.

Aliens. Garmez had not had time to give much thought to the alien visitors. His own life had been moving ahead much too fast. But when he thought about them at all, it was with a kind of derision. If they were going to come all this way, you would think they would have something to tell us. Something important about God and life and the secrets of the universe. But from what he saw on the TV, they had nothing to say at all, except "that's nice" and "how much is that?"

Really, the aliens reminded Garmez of nothing so much as the North American tourists who streamed into the Dominican Republic every winter, buying all kinds of awful crap and burning themselves up on the beach and drinking themselves into oblivion.

It must be awfully boring, he thought, back where these aliens came from. To come all this way to see *us*.

And now, of all the things in the world to see or buy, they had to come *here*. Shaken, he went to see the team manager.

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"How come you never told me about these aliens?" he demanded.

"Only found out myself a few hours ago," the manager said, mildly. "What you got to do now is forget about it. Forget about the aliens. Forget about your streak. Just go out there and play your normal game."

"My normal game, sure," Garmez said. He gazed out through the window at the stadium. It was beginning to fill up. "These aliens. What the hell they want here, anyway?"

"Someone invited them, I guess."

"You think they know about my streak?"

"I'm sure someone told them. Although it probably doesn't mean a hell of a lot to them. I mean, how could it?"

"Yeah," Garmez echoed. "How could it?"

10.

Brady used his press credentials to gain entry into the ballpark. But instead of heading for the press box, he followed the alien to a special roped-off section. Within this section were dozens of aliens, along with various local dignitaries.

A security officer rose to bar his progress.

"It's all right," the alien said. "He's with me."

Gratefully, Brady sank down into an unoccupied seat next to his unexpected sponsor. He realized that he was staring at the thick, reddish neck of the Prime Minister of Canada in the seat ahead of him.

"Very kind of you," he told the alien.

"Think nothing of it, Mr. Brady."

"How do you know my name?"

"I saw it on your press pass."

Brady distinctly remembered that the alien had been ahead of him at the time. But perhaps he was wrong. Or perhaps the aliens were somehow possessed of 360 degree vision.

He could not help but wonder why the alien would knowingly invite a journalist to sit beside him. Since their initial press conference, the aliens had granted no further interviews to the media.

"I most enjoyed your article in this morning's *Tribune,*" the alien said, as if in answer to this unspoken question. "Highly insightful."

"You're interested in probability theory?"

"Fascinated by it."

The alien leaned forward in his seat to watch the proceedings on the field. The Red Sox were batting at the top of the second inning. There was no score as yet, but the Sox, with only one out in the inning, had runners at first and second.

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"If there's anything you don't understand," Brady told the alien, "go ahead and ask."

This was rather a bold offer from a man who, for all his recent research, still had at best a dim understanding of the intricacies of the game.

"Thank you," said the alien, "but I am quite well acquainted with the game, having made a certain study of it. In some ways, it is much like our own . . ." Here he said something untranslatable into Earthly phonetics.

Mumblypobble, Brady scribbled into his notebook, this being the best approximation he could manage.

"Ah," said the alien. "I believe the Sox will certainly sacrifice in this situation, in all likelihood a bunt down the third base line."

Brady scribbled down this alien prognosis.

"Games," said the alien, "are in a way the essence of a culture. The externalization of its most deeply held values about life, time and existential meaning."

Polite applause rippled through the ground as the Red Sox hitter fulfilled the alien's prediction and gave himself up, laying down a bunt that moved the runners to second and third.

A new hitter took his place. He walked stiffly, and his hair was peppered with gray. "Batting .425 lifetime with runners in scoring position," murmured the alien. "But this will certainly be his last season. It's all so wildly nostalgic, is it not?"

"Nostalgic?"

The alien waved his hand in a disconcertingly human gesture. "The knowledge that each moment is precious precisely because it is ephemeral, and will never recur in quite the same way. The awareness of the fleetingness of life, the immediateness of death. The infinite poignancy of history in the making. Consider Victor Garmez." He gestured toward the Blue Jays left fielder. "Will he ever have a finer moment than today?"

The alien smiled. It was a perfectly pleasant smile, yet it was also oddly chilling. Because somehow Brady knew that Victor Garmez would never have a finer moment. Ever, ever again.

11.

A roar went up around the stadium as Victor Garmez stepped into the batter's box in the bottom of the second.

Sure, he thought. Today I'm their hero. But if I don't get a hit, it's back to being a bum. I'll be the guy who couldn't quite get past DiMaggio.

He stared sightlessly into the crowd to where the aliens were supposed to be sitting. He couldn't pick them out. Maybe they hadn't come. But of course, the aliens looked pretty much like humans.

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The roar of applause continued. Some idiot was trying to get a wave going. Garmez called time-out and stepped back for a moment to review the situation. One out, a man on second, Red Sox leading five to nothing. A sacrifice fly would bring home the run, but one run would not make enough difference.

What he needed to do was get on base. He would look for the hit, but accept the walk.

"They're not going to give you anything to hit," the manager had told him. "They'd rather walk you than let you get number fifty-seven against them. If they offer the walk, take it."

"What if they walk me every time?"

"The way they count it now, the streak stays alive. You get another shot tomorrow."

"But what about then? How did they count it *then?*"

"For DiMaggio, you mean? Back then, it had to be consecutive games."

"Then that's how I got to do it, too."

Bold words. A lot bolder than he felt, right now, facing the ace of the Red Sox staff, a big tough right-hander with a fastball averaging ninety-five miles per hour.

He watched, mesmerized, as the Boston pitcher went into his wind-up. And stood, transfixed, as the ball hurtled into his face.

12.

"A close one," remarked the alien, as the hitter seemed to wait until the very last moment to weave out of the way of a high, tight fastball. "Very close. This is a game of surprising violence. And all so very much more vivid in its actuality."

"Actuality?" echoed Brady. "You mean, you used to watch it on TV?"

"Hush," said the alien. "Let us savor the opening round of this most fascinating duel."

Brady watched as, to applause and scattered boos, Garmez walked on four deliveries, without once having attempted contact with the ball.

13.

The afternoon wore on. The Blue Jays picked up a couple of runs, cashing in Garmez's walk. Boston replied with another in the third. Garmez came out to bat again in the fourth with the bases empty, but grounded out to the shortstop. The next player up hit a solo home run.

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The heat of the fierce afternoon sun was making Brady sleepy. He had difficulty keeping his eyes open during the scoreless fifth inning.

"Ah, baseball," the alien said. "Its hypnotic tedium, its mystic transformation of the immediate."

Brady stared at him blankly.

"Philip Roth," the alien said, apparently surprised. "*My Baseball Years*. Surely you've read it?"

"Actually, no."

"It breaks your heart," the alien said. "It is designed to break your heart. Bart Giamatti."

"Who?"

The alien shook his head in apparent disappointment, and returned his attention to the game.

14.

In the sixth, Garmez walked again but was left stranded. The Red Sox continued to lead, six to three.

The Blue Jays scored another run in the seventh and threatened to score more, as the starting pitcher began to tire, but a relief pitcher came on and shut them down.

"You think Garmez is going to do it?" Brady asked, during the seventh inning stretch.

"Surely," the alien said, "you wouldn't want me to spoil it for you?"

15.

Neither side scored in the eighth.

There was an almost palpable air of expectation in the alien section now, as the Red Sox went quietly in the top of the ninth.

The first Blue Jay hitter of the ninth grounded out to first base. Waiting in the on-deck circle was Victor Garmez.

"Why are there so many of you here?" Brady asked.

The alien seemed surprised at this question.

"To see Victor Garmez, of course. As your article points out, this man defies probability. Against astounding odds, he achieves continuity in a universe of flux. In a sense, he defies death. For all of us."

The alien leaned forward in his seat as Garmez took his stance in the batter's box. "Besides," the alien said, "you wouldn't expect us to miss this? To miss the wonderful aching poignancy of it all?"

The crowd gasped as Garmez swung at and missed a breaking ball in

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the dirt. But Brady was not watching. He was consumed, suddenly, by a terrible intuition.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You're not aliens at all! You're *time travelers,* isn't that right? On some kind of baseball junket."

"We are indeed aliens," the alien said, "by any possible yardstick you could imagine. There is a certain quality of brilliance to your deduction, but I am really not at liberty to discuss it with you. At any rate, I now wish to turn my fullest attention to this most diverting spectacle."

16.

Behind 0 and 2. One more strike and it would be over, the whole crazy circus.

Maybe it was better that way, Garmez thought. Better to be a footnote in baseball history than the man who beat DiMaggio. There would be less to live up to afterward.

He wiped the sweat from his brow, took his stance, waggled the bat. Easy, he told himself. Nice and easy.

Curveball, floating way outside. 1 and 2.

Breaking ball, in the dirt.

Fastball, high and inside, jack-knifing him off the plate.

A full count. Another walk? If it came, it came. He watched the pitcher go into his wind-up.

He's got to throw me a strike, Garmez thought. Streak or not, he doesn't want to bring up the tying run. Got to be a fastball straight down the middle.

He watched it coming all the way, as though it were traveling in slow motion. He felt as if he had all the time in the world. The cheers of the crowd damped down to a dull roar, as he brought his bat around. There was a satisfying-crack, and he watched the ball streaking into the right field corner. Then he was rounding second base and being waved on to third.

17.

As the crowd sank back into their seats to watch the next batter, the aliens remained standing. Then they began to file out of the ground.

"Don't you want to see who wins?" Brady asked his alien seatmate.

The alien shrugged. "It doesn't really matter who wins. Either way, the outcome is well within the normal distribution. We've seen quite enough, thank you."

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Brady realized that the Prime Minister had turned around in his seat and was watching this exchange.

"Surely you're staying for the reception?" the Prime Minister asked, a little petulantly.

"Oh no," the alien said. "This has been extremely entertaining, but it really is time to be moving on."

18.

The departure of the aliens caused considerable discussion among the crowd. The umpires called time-out as they waited for the noise to subside. Garmez stood patiently at third base.

"Aliens," the third base coach said. "Go figure them."

19.

With the help of Garmez's triple, the Blue Jays tied up the game in the ninth, sending it into extra innings. The Red Sox, however, finally prevailed in the twelfth. Brady, slumped low in his seat, stayed until the end. It was the first and last major league baseball game he would ever attend.

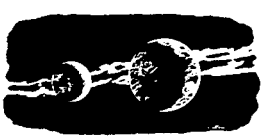
Garmez's streak was broken off the following night, at County Stadium in Milwaukee. But he continued to hit well, and was named Rookie of the Year. Endorsement contracts, including offers from rival ketchup manufacturers, poured in. He was able to build a house for his family in the Dominican Republic, and another for himself in Florida. He did not, however, marry a movie star.

Brady married Janice, but they separated a year later. She took the china, which he had never liked.

The aliens, after their visit to the SkyDome, were not seen again.

Life, within the normal distribution, continued.●

Author's note: I am indebted to Stephen Jay Gould's lucid and poetic article "The Streak of Streaks" (New York Review of Books, August 16, 1988) *for the information on sports probabilities used in this story.*



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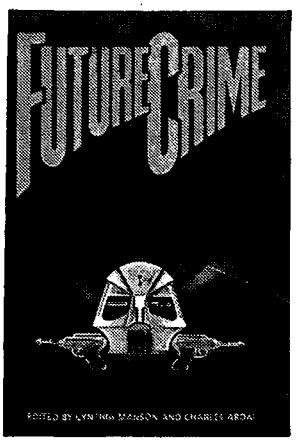

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John Kessel has a short story collection, *Meeting in Infinity*, coming out from Arkham House this summer, and he is currently finishing up his new novel, *Corrupting Dr. Nice*.

His latest tale for *IAsfm* is a dark allegory about what it means to be a...

MAN

by John Kessel

art: John Johnson

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When it woke us in the pre-dawn of that fall morning, I thought the sound in the basement was only the cat—but Linda, who worries about these things, insisted that I check it out. Besides, there sat Groucho, our Siamese, ears pricked, on the bookshelf. The weather had turned cold just four days ago, and maybe an opossum had managed to find its way into the house. But as I pulled on my slippers and robe there came a rustling from directly beneath us so distinct that I shivered, despite my determination to be the calm one, the one in control.

Flashlight in hand, I went to the basement stairs. I flipped on the light and limped down the steps. Groucho, alert and curious, tangled himself underfoot. About halfway down I crouched and looked, eyes level with the floor joists, around the cluttered room. At first I saw nothing unusual, but then noticed, huddled near the sacks of peat moss and pine bark mulch, a third baggy shape. I turned to Linda, who trembled at the top of the stairs. "It's a man," I said.

Linda watched me for a second. "What should we do?"

"Maybe I can scare him away."

"Be careful."

I went back to the bedroom and pulled on the jeans and sweatshirt I'd worn the day before while changing the car's oil. Linda hovered nervously about the basement door. When I went back down he was still where I'd found him. The morning light was coming up through the basement windows; the one on the south wall was pried open. I wondered whether he might be asleep, but then I saw the gleam of his eyes watching me. He didn't move as I picked up a rake and approached. I stood five feet away, trying to seem assured and strong, feeling vulnerable. I waved the rake at him. "Get out. Come on, out!"

His dark eyes watched me. He remained still.

I stepped forward and poked the rake handle at him. At first he didn't react, then his hand flashed out from beneath his rotten coat and he grabbed the end of it. I felt the strength of his grip, like electricity, run up the handle to me. "Get out," I said.

"I'm hungry," he said, getting up. "I need something to eat."

"I don't care whether you're hungry."

We stood there, two men joined by the handle of the rake stiff as a regulation. He was about my size, dark, unkempt hair in his eyes, dressed in khakis with the knees worn through, filthy, once-white running shoes, several layers of T-shirts with a wide-lapelled pinstriped suitcoat over them. The top T-shirt had writing on it: "I'm with stupid."

He smiled at me. "New Orleans?"

"What?"

"The whores on Canal Street. Hurricanes in plastic cups. Fat tourists from Texarkana, wearing masks. The whole sleazy scene."

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"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You remind me of somebody I knew there. Farmer Brown, we called him." He let go of the rake handle, shoving it away disdainfully, as if he'd played this game many times before and was tired of it. "He had a rake, too."

"Get out of my basement."

" 'Get out of my basement,' " he mocked. "Get serious, Farmer Brown."

Groucho brushed against my leg, then moved forward to sniff the man's shoes. He crouched down, picked up the cat and held him in his lap, scratching him gently behind the ears. Groucho stretched and settled down, purring audibly.

"I want you out of here."

"I want a cigarette holder and a vacation in Portugal." He addressed the cat. "Think it's likely I'll get them, puss-puss?"

I looked over my shoulder. Linda stood halfway down the stairs, watching. "Go back up," I told her. Clutching the rake, I followed her up to the kitchen.

"Tom, you've got to do something."

My gut was already tied in a knot, and Linda's pushing only wrenched it further. "I don't know what to do."

"Well, you can't just leave him down there." Linda turned her back on me and started banging last night's dishes in the sink. "The Criswells had a man in their garage last winter and it took three months before they could get him out. The place still smells like an outhouse. What if he comes upstairs while we're asleep?"

"He's not going to come upstairs. He's probably as scared of us as we are of him." Even as I spoke I knew it was an evasion.

"I don't care whether *he's* scared. I want him out of there."

I ran my hand through my hair. "Look. For now we can lock the basement door. There's not much he can get into. He can use the bathroom down there. Maybe he'll go away if we don't feed him. If he's still here when we come back from work, then I promise you, I'll get him out."

Linda just stared at me. I could tell she was furious, but also scared, wanting to cry but damned if she would. Her jaw clenched and she stalked back to the bedroom. I heard water run in the bathroom. I stared out the window over the kitchen sink, then turned on the coffee maker. Groucho rubbed against my ankles, begging for breakfast. Aside from Linda and the chirping of birds in the yard, there was no sound. I wondered who Farmer Brown was.

I've never been to New Orleans, but what I hear of it does not appeal to me. Sleazy bars, sex for money, the American version of the fevered exoticism of some Caribbean tourist town.

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I'm a quiet man, and I've led a quiet life. The one way in which my childhood might be said to have differed from most was in its loneliness. I was an only child of elderly parents. My father and mother owned a drugstore in Tampa, where most of the people are old. Our neighborhood had few children. On top of that, when I was eight I broke my leg bicycling and was out of school, in a chest-to-knee cast, for five months. I came out of it with a right leg an inch shorter than my left and a permanent limp. Add to this a reticent nature and the result was that I never seemed to develop any lasting friendships.

This solitude followed me into adulthood; aside from Linda, I had no close friends.

The neighborhood where we lived was old and well-established. A man in the basement was a fairly unusual occurrence, though since the new subdivisions had sprouted north of the city limits there had been increased numbers of cases even in the heart of town. It had not gotten to be a big enough problem that the city council had paid any attention to it, though Mr. Rappaport, the cranky retiree who lived behind us, had raised the issue at the last meeting of the neighborhood association.

At the studio that day I concentrated on finishing the Hayes Engineering Group annual report I'd been working on for the last twelve weeks. The project was due at the printer by Thursday. As usual, the client had dawdled on giving the necessary approvals and now was insisting on last-minute changes after the type had been set, yet still expected me to meet the deadline. Still, Horowitz, the printing rep at Athena Graphics, assured me that they would go to press by the weekend even if it meant in the middle of the night. Just before lunch I got a call from Hayes himself. "Larson?"

"Yes?"

"I was just looking over the proofs you sent me again and it struck me that it might be more effective if you put all the figures in boldface. It would make them stand out more."

"I couldn't do that without compromising the entire design, Mr. Hayes. You can't just change one element like that without rethinking everything else."

"I'm not talking about changing a single word. Just the typeface."

I counted to three. "If you insist, I'll do it. But I can't guarantee we'll get done on time."

"Such a simple change? I thought you were a resourceful young man."

I was up against it. Hayes was a new client, and I expected to get a lot of business from him over the next years. I had lowballed my bid to get my foot in the door, promising first class design and first class service. "I'll have to talk this over with the printer. I'll get back to you."

"You do that."

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It was all I could do to keep from slamming down the phone. If the printer got rushed he'd screw up for sure and my whole plan would go down the tubes. My life was turning to shit.

Halfway through lunch I remembered the man in the basement and hurried over to the Hardware Warehouse at the Wonderlands Mall. After letting me wander around the home and garden section long enough to feel totally self-conscious, a salesman came up. He had the professionally competent manner of his breed; his nameplate read "Roger." I was already faintly annoyed. "Well, Roger, what have you got to help me get rid of a man in my basement?"

"Man in the basement? How old?"

"I can't tell how old he is, exactly. I didn't ask. He's not small—probably six feet tall, one-seventy or so."

The conversation turned into a manhood challenge. Roger wasn't going to help me until I admitted I was incompetent and needed his help. He was the expert, and I was the one who didn't know how to take care of myself. As we stood there in the aisle I got more and more angry, yet felt unable to escape.

"He's the violent type?"

"Yes. No question about it."

"You want to kill him?" Roger finally asked.

"Of course." I tried to act like there was never any question.

Roger turned and led me, limping more obviously in the effort to keep up with him, to another quarter of the store, beneath a big red banner hanging from the rafters reading "Home Improvements." He took a clear plastic bag of powder from a shelf. *Quietus,* it said in bright red letters. The powder inside might have been brown sugar.

"This here's the quality product on the market right now. Couple of tablespoonfuls in some food—peanut butter or oatmeal work good. The stuff's tasteless, but it has a texture to it, so it should be something that will disguise that. But usually these guys are so hungry it doesn't much matter."

When I got home there was music playing on the stereo. Nick Lowe's "Cruel to be Kind." I heard sounds from the kitchen. "Linda?" I called.

He stuck his head through the doorway into the living room. "Howdy, Farmer Brown," he said, then ducked back into the kitchen. I followed. He stood at the counter making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I don't know why I should have felt shocked, but it was as if I'd found a large cockroach in the bathtub. I hesitated in the doorway. He looked at me, finished spreading peanut butter on a slice of wheat bread, joined the halves of the sandwich and took a bite. Crumbs were scattered all over the counter and he'd left the tops off the jars. He nodded at the paper bag in my hand, still chewing. "Did you buy me something?"

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I put the bag of poison into the pantry. "Brown sugar," I said. "How did you get upstairs?"

"Not much of a lock on that basement door. You should take care of that."

"What gives you the idea you can just come in here and use our things, eat our food?"

"Is this your food? Are these your things?"

"Well, they aren't yours."

"Possession is nine tenths of the law." He took another bite of the sandwich. "And in my experience, possession is a matter of character."

I went to the liquor cabinet and poured myself a scotch. It burned going down, warmed my belly, its scent backing up my nose. Instantly I felt the beginning of a headache. I picked up the mail from the kitchen table. The man drew himself a glass of water and sat down opposite me. Just two old friends, long separated, sitting around the house having a chat. "Tough day?" he said.

"None of your business."

"You know, in my mind I can visualize what it must be like to have a job like yours. I have a very powerful mind. And it seems to me, in my mind, that it's only after you stop taking other people's shit that you start to taste life." He took another bite of the sandwich, and grinned.

In the living room Lowe was singing about making an American squirm. I sucked down the scotch, trying to figure out what to do next. When I heard Linda's car in the driveway my anxiety came back. I looked at the basement door.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't tell her you couldn't face me."

"I am facing you."

He watched me, took a sip of water. Something in the way he did this was so fastidious that it stood out in contrast to his shabby clothes, rude manner. "Of course you are, Farmer Brown," he said. I heard the front door open.

"She won't leave you just because you're scared," the man said softly. "I am, after all, an unpleasant reality."

He went down the stairs to the basement.

Linda came into the kitchen. She looked at the drink in my hand. "Is he still down there?"

"He's still there," I said.

She went into the living room and turned down the stereo. She came back into the kitchen, grim faced, and screwed the top back on the jar of peanut butter. Brushing crumbs off the counter into her hand, she said, "I wish you'd put things away after you use them, Tom."

* * *

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By mid-evening the headache was going strong. I hadn't felt like eating, and we'd passed supper in silence.

"Just don't press me about this," I told her later. "Trust me: I'll get him out." We were undressing for bed; we'd not exchanged three sentences that evening. She slipped on the T-shirt and shorts she wore instead of pajamas. Her shoulders were still slender as a girl's. I wanted her; we hadn't made love for weeks, but Linda's manner was as cold as if sex had not been invented yet. "He's not dangerous," I insisted.

"I don't care if he isn't." Her voice was brittle. "He scares me."

"He scares me, too. I want him out of here. But let it be for awhile. I'll get him out." She got into bed; I reached over to touch her shoulder. She pulled away. "Linda?"

She didn't answer. My stomach churned. I turned off the light and lay there silently for a long time. Lying there, I thought about him. I pictured him crouched in the dark of the basement, the musty smell, the crickets and spiders. He was alone down there; I was alone up here. I imagined getting up, going to the refrigerator, popping the tops on two beers and going down to visit him. We might sit on the old lawn chairs and talk, in low whispers, careful not to wake Linda. We would tell each other our stories. Groucho would come down and curl up on my lap. Our eyes, the man's and mine, would glint in the darkness like those of two untamed and sullen beasts.

Eventually, thinking of him, I fell asleep.

In the morning I got up before Linda and made myself some oatmeal. I sliced a banana into it and sprinkled it with brown sugar. The bag of poison lay on the pantry shelf like an accusation. I poured a cup of coffee and turned on the stereo. U2: *Rattle and Hum*. I kept the volume down, ate my oatmeal, and listened to the music.

Afterwards I went down to the basement to check up on him. He'd cleared out one end of the basement, found the old canvas cot from among the camping equipment and set it up. But he wasn't there, and the basement window was opened wide. I felt relief, to be sure, but also a vague disappointment.

When I turned to go back upstairs he entered from the basement bathroom. He had my briefcase and car keys in his hand and acted as if he was about to step out the door. The jeans and shirt he was wearing he must have taken from the laundry room. Although he seemed to have showered and washed his hair, he had not shaved, and, with the rumpled clothes, looked more like somebody going on vacation than to work. "What do you think you're doing?" I asked him.

"I'm going down to your studio. You look like you could use a day off."

"You can't go to work dressed like that!"

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"What's the use of being your own boss if you have to invent a dress code?"

"You don't know the first thing about my work."

"I know more than you think. I've looked through the stuff in here," he said, hefting the briefcase. "Besides, what's there to know? No sense throwing a veil of mystery over what must be mostly a matter of snowing the people who pay you. It's all in your attitude."

I followed him, ineffectual as smoke, as he went upstairs and out the door. He climbed into my car and drove away.

I stood there stunned until Linda came into the room. She looked over at the stereo, which had gotten as far as "Love Rescue Me."

"I thought I heard you leave. Aren't you going to work today?"

"No. If you're so damned hot about me getting rid of that man in the basement, then I'm going to have to stay home and work on it."

She looked at me, surprised at my anger. For a moment I could see the absolute weariness and disgust in her face. Not only did she dislike me, she had absolutely no respect for me and was tired of putting up with the charade. While she went into the kitchen to make her breakfast I slumped onto the sofa and pretended to read the sports page. The gray lines of newsprint slid past my eyes unread. The CD cycled to "God Part II." I turned up the volume to window-shaking levels. The phase-distorted guitar bounced the knickknacks on the mantel.

Linda came out and shouted something at me. I shook my head and pointed at my deaf ears. She stalked out of the house, slamming the front door. I tried not to imagine what she'd make of my missing car. The stereo wailed. I believed in love, but it wasn't working.

So I got drunk. After I polished off the bottle of scotch I switched to brandy. I played loud music, stared at Linda's books crowding the living room shelves, and felt alternately sorry for myself and murderously angry. At Linda, at my clients, at the man in the basement.

Except he wasn't down there anymore. Brandy in my hand, unshaven and rank, I stumbled downstairs to his lair. You would hardly have known that anyone had been there. It suddenly hit me to wonder whether he was going to come meekly back down when he returned from my studio.

It ought not to have been so hard to get rid of him. He was not a family member. He was not a guest. We didn't owe him anything. We had gotten along fine without him for many years. If any of the neighbors had men in their basements it was not a fact they advertised. And who knew what damage he was doing to the business I had labored over the last six years to erect?

Around five he pulled into the driveway and sauntered in, whistling.

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He tossed my briefcase onto the ottoman, flopped down on the sofa and put his feet up on the big coffee table Linda had brought with her from before we got married. "Howdy, Farmer Brown. Where's your rake?"

He looked so relaxed there, and I was so drunk, that instead of getting angry I felt sad. I sat down next to him. "What happened at the studio today? Did you really go there?"

"Nowhere else. You can stop worrying about the Hayes Group report."

"What do you mean?"

"I fired the printer. Horowitz was lying to you all along. He wasn't going to meet the deadline, and while he put you off with excuses the bastard went behind your back to Hayes and blamed the delays and mistakes on you."

"You can't fire him! It's too late! I can't find another printer on such short notice. Hayes is already breathing down my neck."

"Right. So I told Hayes that under the circumstances I'd understand if he went elsewhere."

"You *what?* Hayes is my biggest client. If I could satisfy him I'd double my income in the next twelve months."

"At the cost of an ulcer. And your balls. Hayes is a petty tyrant and a coward. A man with a bank account and no integrity. Do you really need the money that bad?"

I started to protest, but then the thought of never having to suck up to Hayes, or deal with the printer's lies, sank in. My shoulders already felt less tight. "I don't know," I said.

"You don't know. But I do."

I took another sip of brandy. Groucho came by, hopped onto my lap, and began butting my hand. I heard Linda's car in the driveway. She came in laden with books, briefcase, staggering as she dangled two recyclable sacks of groceries from her fingertips. She saw us on the sofa and dropped the groceries.

I sat there. The man leapt up and took one bag from her arms, scooped the fallen one from the floor. "I was just helping Tom," he said. "I might as well help you, too."

Staring at me as if she could not believe it, a little dazed, she said, "I guess so."

The was the beginning. In a week he had come to be a part of our lives. I still went to work, but when I felt bad or woke up late or was hung over or didn't feel like shaving, he filled in. I can't tell you that, along with the worry, I didn't feel relief. I can't say, honestly, that he did a worse job that I would have. He did a different one.

Linda was at first nervous around him. She never gave him the opportunity to touch her, even the most casual of contacts. I remember once

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when she was washing out the coffee pot and he took it from her to dry. He touched her wrist, and she shuddered visibly. I took this for distaste, and felt guilty about it, acted apologetic around her as if the man were my idea, as if I had brought him into the house and was the one responsible for keeping him. I can't even say that wasn't true, although it's not all of the truth. Linda didn't let me touch her, either.

The man treated me with playful contempt through which I read some other attitude. An attitude I could not define. I found myself becoming more antisocial. I no longer gladly put up with the hypocrisies necessary to do business. If people asked me a question, I told them the truth, regardless of the reaction. If they didn't want an answer, then why did they ask? I watched people in the streets, at restaurants, in movie theaters. How many women had some shrill madwoman in their attics? How many men had a man in their basement, calling them mocking names, making himself indispensable? Did they summon him upstairs when they felt the need, regretting and needing him at the same time, humiliated yet queerly pleased?

I let my hair grow long and stopped shaving. The man got his hair cut. He began to wear my clothes, which fit him, more or less. Cleaned up, smelling of cologne and wearing my suit, he resembled me—except for my limp—though no one who knew me would mistake us for each other. On days when I did go to work I would come home to find him sitting around the living room, reading Linda's books, playing my CDs. He said he was getting a good picture of our characters.

"And what do you think of us?" I said.

"I think you are more or less what you expect to be."

Things got pretty slow at my studio. I spent some long hours there trying to please the clients I had left, repeatedly calculating my monthly overhead and eyeing the incredible shrinking balance in my business account. I made call after call to former clients, always on some flimsy pretext, pretending to be casual, hoping they might throw me some business. When this got to be too much for me I'd walk across the street to the park and feed nuts to the squirrels.

One lunchtime, to my surprise, I found Simpson Hayes sitting out there on one of the benches. For a minute I thought about circling behind to the other side of the park, but then he looked up and saw me. I sat down beside him. "Fancy meeting you here," I said.

"Larson," he said. There were dark circles under his eyes. "How's business?"

"Business is just fine."

"That's not what Horowitz tells me."

"If you still believe what he tells you, then there's no point in us talking."

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To my surprise, Hayes smiled—a trifle grimly. "Horowitz really screwed you over there, didn't he. He was lying to you."

"You figured that out. Maybe you've caught on that you can't trust Athena Graphics?"

"So what? I can't say I have much sympathy for you. You can't let anyone get the advantage over you. Not if you're a professional."

"A professional."

"A pro sees what has to be done, then he does it. It doesn't matter how he feels about it. That's why you're a lousy businessman."

I thought of a dozen defensive replies, started to speak, said nothing. I opened my bag of peanuts and scattered a few on the path in front of us. "You look worn out, Hayes. Is being such a macho man hard work?"

He looked at me sharply. "You're the one who's going out of business."

I was tired of him. "That's right, I almost forgot. Thanks for reminding me." I got up and crossed back to my office.

I was in no mood to face my empty drafting table so I decided to call it a day. The encounter with Hayes was the last straw. The more I thought about him the madder I got. The guy as much as admitted he was getting fucked by Horowitz, he looked like he hadn't slept in three days, and still his only reaction to seeing me was to try to make me feel like shit.

On the way home it occurred to me that Hayes might be fighting a man in his basement. What would he do? Kill him, probably, in short order. Hayes and the man were birds of a feather, both followers of the Attila the Hun school of interpersonal relations. For them, there were no limits. If the world were made of people like them we'd still be dodging spears.

I was the one in trouble, not Hayes.

To my surprise, when I reached home Linda's car was in the driveway. I panicked when I thought of her alone with the man. He was capable of anything. I hurried to the door, rushed in. Silently I moved down the hall. The bedroom door stood open. I heard a rustling of bedclothes. I came in on them naked in each other's arms, caught a glimpse of Linda's face, eyes closed and lips parted, cheeks flushed as he rocked her in his arms, her head almost off the side of the bed. The man glanced up at me; the corner of his mouth quirked upward in a grin. Linda's eyes came open and I turned and stumbled from the room.

If I'd thought my intrusion might have disturbed them I was sadly mistaken. I'd sat for forty minutes, fuming, in the den before either of them came to face me. It was Linda, wearing her blue terrycloth bathrobe. Her cheeks were still flushed, her hair tangled. "What are you doing back so early?"

"What am *I* doing?"

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She sat down on the loveseat. "I'm sorry, Tom. I told you to get rid of him. I told you he was dangerous."

"You didn't tell me that you were."

"No I didn't. You just assumed I was harmless."

"Where is he?"

She smoothed the robe over her leg. I ached to touch her. "He went back into the basement."

"That's not good enough, Linda. None of this is. You owe me better than this."

"So? This is a two-way street."

"Shut up! Just shut up! I'm the one who's been betrayed here."

"Don't be too sure of that. It took more than just me for things to get so bad between us."

I couldn't stand it. I stormed into the kitchen, kicked open the basement door and stalked down the stairs. He was lounging on the old lawn chair, sipping a scotch.

"Well, if it isn't Farmer Brown," he said. "Hello, Farmer Brown."

"Don't call me that."

"What shall I call you, Farmer Brown?"

"You slept with my wife."

"Actually, we hadn't gotten around to the sleeping part yet."

I paced around the basement. It hardly seemed like the place it had been before he'd come. It looked like a shabby apartment in some third world country. Some student's room, halfway between a hovel and the lower middle class, part way up the evolutionary scale but not there yet.

"All right," I said. "You've screwed up our lives enough. I want you out of here—right now."

"You don't want me out of here. If I left, you'd be a lump of clay without me. That's all, a lump of clay."

"Better a lump of clay and peaceful. You're ripping me apart! I didn't ask for this."

"Yes you did. We both know you wanted me here, you called me up, and after I leave you'll be dead. You want me gone? Here, take this." He reached behind him on the floor, picked something up and held it out to me. It was the bag of poison. "It would be more honest to kill yourself."

I just stood there. "That's what you want me to think—that I can't live without you. But who says I can't?"

"She's never going to give you what you want, Tom. Love without any responsibilities? It doesn't exist in the real world, once we leave the womb. And you can't even handle the affection you're getting now—pitiful as it is."

"Stop it!"

"What's the matter—hitting too close to home? I know you. The reason

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I'm here is to make up for all that. For you to live without me would be for you to eat all the shit the world offers, and call it whipped cream. It would mean you'd accept it all. You'd be saying it never could be any better."

"Maybe it can't."

"Suit yourself. That's not my department. I'm only the alternative."

My eyes were burning. "Okay, okay," I said. "Maybe you're right. But does it have to be so painful? I can't go on living like this. I fooled myself for years, living half alive, growing a tumor because that's all I knew. I don't want to live that way anymore. I can't. I'll do myself in. I want some peace."

"What do I know about peace? I'm just the man in your basement." He drained the last of the scotch, leaned back calm as a millionaire on permanent vacation.

I caught my breath. "Fuck you," I said, rage erasing the humiliation. "I don't believe I've put up with you for so long. I don't even know your name."

"My name is Tom."

That was it. I grabbed the rake and swung round on him, whipping it level like a baseball bat. Quick as thought, he caught the handle and wrenched it out of my hands. He stood up. Not even breathing hard, he tossed the rake onto the floor. He flipped the bag of poison at me. I caught it, fumbling.

"You are truly pitiful," he said. "Do something constructive. Use it."

I turned and limped up the stairs, past Linda where she waited in the kitchen, out the front door and into my car. I drove around for a while, barely able to see the streets through my tears, the bag of poison on the passenger's seat beside me.

Unconsciously I found myself downtown, driving toward my studio. I couldn't face that. Instead I pulled into the Saratoga Street ramp. I sat in my parked car, hands gripping the wheel, crying out loud now, for a long time. Eventually I stopped. I sat back, breathing hard, and took the bag onto my lap. *Quietus*. I could tear it open right there, take a good healthy mouthful. I squeezed the bag with my thumbs, feeling the moist powder inside, and gradually all thought drained from my mind.

It was four-thirty and the ramp started to get busy with people heading out for an early start on the weekend. I saw Clarice Ward, an architect who worked in the Hayes Engineering Group. The group's office was in the Columbia Tower attached to the deck.

I got out of the car. Ignoring the elevator in order to avoid facing anyone, I took the stairs up to the Hayes Group office. It was hard work making it up ten flights of stairs with my bum leg.

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Hayes's secretary, who had put me off dozens of times over the phone, was cleaning up her desk. "Mr. Hayes is gone," she said.

"Then he won't mind my dropping something off in his office," I said, and pushed past her through the door.

Hayes was leaning back in his chair, gazing out the window at the skyline. "Time to go home, Hayes," I said. "Don't be a workaholic. It's Friday."

He swiveled around, face creased with annoyance. "What do you want?"

"I want to help you out."

He stared up at me. He really did look exhausted. "Look, if I hurt your feelings this afternoon I'm sorry."

"I appreciate the sentiment. But I didn't come here looking for an apology, either. Are you having some trouble at home?"

"Nothing I can't handle." He played with the Waterman pen on his desk blotter, spinning it like a pinwheel. "Look, Tom. If you need work I'll think about it. I'll call you."

"I don't need work, I'm just paying a social call. That problem at home? Maybe you've got some vermin in the basement?" I slapped the bag of *Quietus* down on the desk. "You might have use for this."

He looked at me with new interest. "You've had trouble with —intruders?"

"Just one."

He picked up the poison. "This bag hasn't been opened."

"Because my troubles are over. Use it if you can't think of anything better. Then give me a call and maybe I can help you salvage your report."

I left him there, turning the bag over in his hands. I walked back down the stairs to the parking deck, and it did not seem to me that my leg bothered me much at all.

When I came back home, the house was dark. I considered confronting them, but the thought of another ugly scene, and the pain it would inevitably cause me—and Linda—kept me away from the bedroom. I would save that for tomorrow. It was not that I could put it off forever—I was through putting things off—but I didn't need it now. The question for now was, where would I sleep?

The place was silent and dark. Streetlight coming through the blinds threw lines of light and shadow across the furniture, casting everything into high relief. Sleeping on the sofa, an antique Linda had picked out for us, would be like spending the night on broken ground. Instead I walked from room to room, seeing our house as I had not seen it before. There were the oak bookshelves Linda had picked out, lining the living

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room wall. On the shelves were ranked the spines of her books, English and American literature, political science, philosophy, religion. How many of them were mine?—there, in the lower corner of the last shelf, a pile of AIGA annuals and *Communication Arts*. Not an impressive showing.

Here was Linda's coffee table. The stereo cabinet—I remembered us going to pick it out, how she had stated unequivocally what she wanted, while I kept my mouth shut. The pictures on the wall—her choice, too.

It was not a bad-looking home, or an uncomfortable one. It was very livable. But it did not look like the home of a graphic designer, and it hit me that, if I were to leave and never come back, Linda would not have to change the house in any significant way to make it completely hers. I wasn't evident in our home at all.

Well, that didn't have to be. I went over to the shelf, took out my books and laid them on the coffee table. The armchair—I had never liked the way it sat across from the window, throwing the late afternoon light into your eyes. I moved the lamp, the chair. I shoved the sofa away from the wall, took down Linda's photos from Oxford that hung above the stereo cabinet and replaced them with the Magritte print from my study. By the entryway I piled the knickknacks from the mantel that would have to go elsewhere.

It ended up an hour of sweaty work in the dark, and I made some noise, but if they heard any of this in the bedroom they did not bother about it. Groucho came out, miaowed once, and sat on the ottoman to watch. As I worked it seemed to me that my leg did not ache as it often had under stress before. It tingled. When I was done I sat in the armchair, in its new place, and looked around the still-dark room. It was recognizably the same room, but at least now I could point in it to those things that were mine. Paint the walls and bookshelves white and it would be an entirely brighter place.

Now where to sleep? Not the sofa. Then I had an idea, the most natural idea in the world. I went down to the basement, to the cot where the man had been. It did not look half so strange as it had the other times I'd been there. I lay down. It smelled familiar, not so musty. It felt more comfortable than I remembered. As I lay there I imagined how it would be to live down here for years, ignored, unable to affect what went on upstairs, barely surviving, limping along alive but unheard. I thought about New Orleans and Mardi Gras, the masked and drunken people in the streets, spending a night on pleasure because they owed that to some part of themselves that would be stifled by the sacrifices of Lent. Eventually I fell asleep, and slept more restfully than I had for weeks.

In the morning I was wakened, in the pre-dawn, by the footsteps of someone on the stairs.

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It was Linda. She stood there uncertainly, the flashlight in her hand. "I woke up and no one was there," she said. "I was so afraid I was alone, and I looked all through the house. Why did you come back down here?"

Still fuddled by sleep, I held up my hand to shield my eyes from the light. I was not entirely sure where I was or how I had come to be there. Cold morning air flowed in through the opened window. "I thought you didn't want me up there."

"Of course I want you. It scared me when I woke and you weren't next to me."

"I guess I didn't know that." I sat up on the edge of the cot. Groucho hopped up beside me and rubbed my hand. I took him in my arms, stood and went to Linda.

She watched me soberly, her eyes glistening."You changed everything around. It's different up there now."

I held Groucho out to her and she scratched him under the chin. He purred. She took my arm and we climbed the stairs together. My limp was entirely gone. ●

". . . SWEATING ON A PALE JURASSIC BEACH."

All time sped by me
in a blurring morning haze
that the sun could not burn off.
I woke up sweating
on a pale Jurassic beach.

—Scott E. Green

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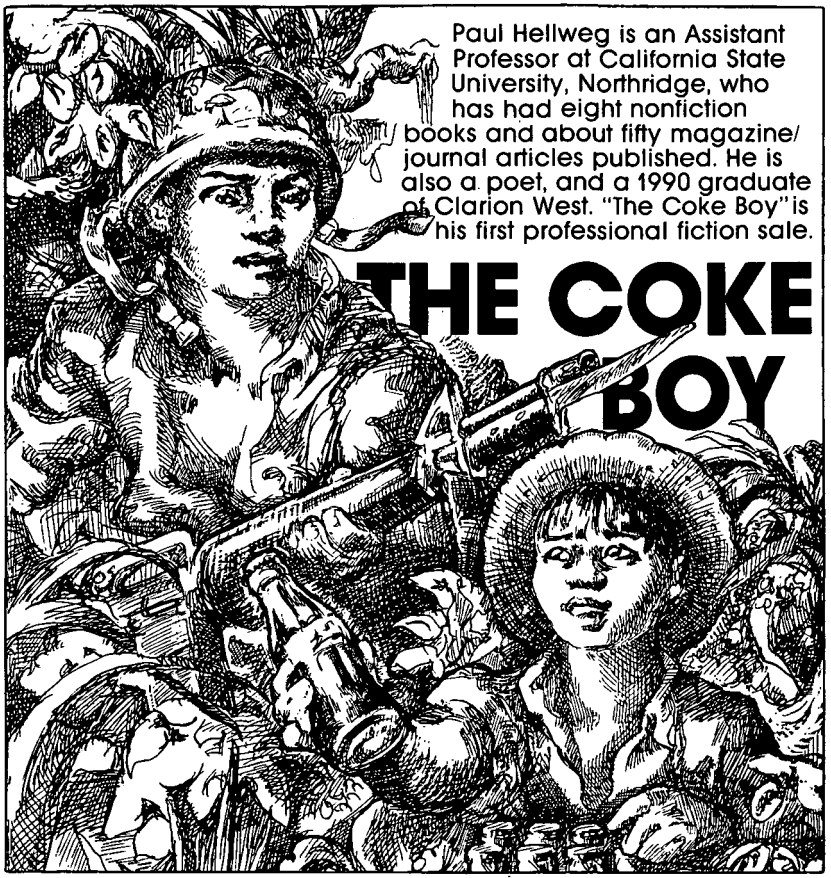

Paul Hellweg is an Assistant Professor at California State University, Northridge, who has had eight nonfiction books and about fifty magazine/journal articles published. He is also a poet, and a 1990 graduate of Clarion West. "The Coke Boy" is his first professional fiction sale.

THE COKE BOY

art: Beryl Bush

by Paul Hellweg

It's been twenty years, two months, and twenty-seven days since the first time I killed the Coke boy. And it's been twenty years to the day since the last time. Not that I'm counting, of course. Twenty years. About time to spill my guts and cleanse my soul, if you know what I mean.

Everyone says war is hell, but most say it without any understanding of what hell is or can be. Even the grunts who were there. I too once said war is hell. I had survived four ambushes and I'd taken a round through the buttocks. But that was before the Coke boy. Now I can't believe how naive I'd been.

The first time I saw him, I didn't kill him. No one did. We were on a routine jungle patrol about twenty klicks out of Lai Khe, right in the heart of the good ol' Iron Triangle. In case you haven't heard of it, let me tell you the Iron Triangle ranks right up there with Dien Bien Phu

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and The Street Without Joy for bringing shudders to a grown man's soul. So there we were in the godforsaken jungle, right smack in the middle of a free fire zone, which—if you don't know militarese—means that if it moves, you kill it.

The day was green and hot and sweaty. It was sort of like walking through a combination hot house/steam bath that's been painted every shade of green you can imagine—you know, olive, lime, emerald, jade, and half-a-dozen more. My platoon was spread out in file, maintaining the textbook five-meter interval between men. I brought up the rear, which was much better than being on point. Mr. Charles was partial to two types of ambushes. His favorite was to let the point pass by, then hit the middle of a column. His other was to hit the point and rear simultaneously, cutting off either advance or retreat. He favored that one along roads, being as it didn't work too well in jungle. So as I said, I kinda liked bringing up the rear.

My platoon was part of a company providing security for Firebase Foxtrot. Mr. Charles was getting in the habit of shelling our little firebase most every night. Our job was to flush him out and persuade him to cease and desist. We knew he was around, and most likely he knew we were coming. Goes to make for a bit of a nervous situation. So I'm bringing up the rear, and I'm scared. No more than usual, just your routine you-might-be-killed-any-second fear.

We're walking along, some of us bored, some of us scared, all of us hot and tired. Thirty-five Americans can't walk through a jungle quietly. Maybe Mr. Charles could, but we never learned how. So I'm walking along, hearing all types of stuff: the rustle of vines being brushed aside, the thwack-thwack of someone's machete, the occasional curse, the random clank and jingle of canteens and ammo belts. Other than the fear, my most vivid memory is of oppression, a sense of being trapped or doomed or something like that. Though it was midday, we walked through twilight gloom, the sunlight filtered through layer upon layer of green. Each breath was too rich, containing too much moisture and too much stink of decaying vegetation. I wanted to bolt, I wanted to escape the dampness and rot spreading through my lungs. I wanted to live. I wanted so much. What did I do? I walked and I looked and I listened.

It was my job to keep looking back, you know, make sure Mr. Charles doesn't sneak up behind. But you can't walk through jungle looking back all the time. Gotta see where you're going too. So I'm hiking along, M16 at the ready, nerves at the ready, when I get this really strange sensation. I felt like a little kid with a monster under the bed. You know you should look, but looking is about the hardest thing in the world to do. I could just picture Mr. Charles standing there with a big grin, ready to

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blow me to kingdomcome the moment I looked. But of course I did look, and that's when I first saw him: the Coke boy.

He was a cross between Huck Finn and a genuine Dodger Stadium cola hawker. Maybe twelve or so. Starting from the top: genuine Huck Finnish straw hat, straight black hair, sheepish grin, dirty white button-down shirt, red shorts, spindly yellow legs, and a pair of Ho Chi Minh rubber tire sandals. And around his shoulders, a strap suspending a bright red Coca-Cola tray, just like you see at the ball game. And that tray wasn't empty, no sir. He had what looked to be a full case of the real McCoy, dewy green bottles of imported-from-the-U.S.A. Coca-Cola.

He motioned to the tray and called out to me: "Hey GI, you want?"

Of *course* I wanted. But my god, our operation was supposed to be a secret! We weren't in the habit of telling Mr. Charles where we were headed. Yet here was this kid. If *he* could find us, then Mr. Charles could too. Oh man, was I scared. Too scared for a Coke even, and you gotta understand I was oh so hot and thirsty.

So I told this kid where he could go, and I threw in a comment or two about his ancestry. By then, word had spread up the platoon file, and guys were turning around. Higgins and the Gringo Kid sauntered over. Gringo wanted to waste the boy, on account of this being a free fire zone and all. So I told him where *he* could go, too. The "shoot it if it moves" rule applies to unidentified targets, not an innocent kid standing right in front of you. I made some real threatening gestures with my rifle, and eventually the Coke boy got the idea. He wandered off without selling a single Coke. After he'd gone, I got to thinking that maybe I shoulda bought one. It was that hot.

We resumed the march, and about ten minutes later walked right into the kill zone of a claymore mine. One dead and five wounded, with a couple of them not looking so hot. And I'm sure you can guess the first thing that came to everyone's mind: the Coke boy. We had been set up. I hope you can understand what we did the next time we saw him. The very next day, the very same scenario. Walking along, hot and tired, me at the rear again. A familiar sensation, and looking back, there he was, as sweet and innocent looking as ever, asking the same old question: "Hey GI, you want?"

No way was I going to buy one of his filthy Cokes. I might have taken one off his dead body, but Gringo shot him up so bad there wasn't a bottle left. Just shattered glass, foaming Coke, spilled blood, and a dead kid with a strangely serene smile. Of course, we were set up again, ambush this time. Lucky for us Mr. Charles sprang it early. Couple guys near the point got shot up a bit, but they both lived. I like to think that I'm a decent person, but I tell you, I was happy to see that kid get his.

Obviously our Coke boy wasn't the only civilian to die in that war,

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right? But let me tell you what happened next. We saw him *again*. And *killed* him again. M79 grenade this time, not much of anything left, let alone a bottle of Coke. We got hit soon after, snipers this time. Shot Higgins through the arm and the Lieutenant through the neck. Man, were we gettin' jumpy, me especially. It was always *me* the kid addressed his question to: "Hey GI, you want?" I wanted *outta* there, is what I wanted.

That's when the real hell started. The war itself was bad enough. Killing and being killed for reasons we didn't understand. It all seemed so unreal: the long boring marches in the sun, the occasional adrenaline-pumping rush of combat. You could share a cup of coffee with a guy in the morning, and he'd have an arm and a leg blown off by noon. If you told a pretty little girl you were going on an operation, she'd tell Mr. Charles, and he'd have a surprise waiting for you. You'd hump your ass all day, hot and thirsty, then have a cold beer off the resupply chopper that night. You could be in the sweltering field one day, and an air-conditioned PX the next. That's how unreal it all was.

But I had to keep it real. I had to keep it real if I was going to survive. If the insanity got to me, I would end up like Higgins and the Lieutenant and the others. *That* much I knew. Start thinking it's a game, lower your guard, and you're a dead man.

I did pretty well, too, until the Coke boy came along. After we killed him the second time, I began to have doubts about my sanity. Got so I hardly knew *what* to believe. I kept telling myself it couldn't have been the same kid. Had to have been his twin brother or his cousin Nguyen. But I had looked into his eyes, and I had *known* it was him. Both times. So I was thinking that maybe we hadn't really killed him the first time. Maybe the Coke tray had stopped the bullets. But that can't be. If you've ever seen a dead man, you can always tell. I'm here to say that that kid was *dead*. Twice.

Guess my nerves were getting to my stomach, cause I started passing gas like you wouldn't believe. I know everyone farts, but not like this. I could let out a ten second beauty and moments later do it all over again. And I began smoking in earnest. Every free moment found me with a lit cigarette, drawing the smoke in deep and holding it—like I was trying to hold on to reality. Gringo said I was smoking too much, which was a reasonable observation when he made it. I had two cigarettes going at the time, one in each hand.

The worst was my rifle. Whenever we locked and loaded for patrol, I'd draw the bolt back and take a peek to make sure a round was chambered. That was before. Now I'd never trust myself, and would have to look again and again. Got to where I'd be walking along continuously looking. I'd draw the bolt back, see that shiny brass case, then snap her home.

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Almost instantly I'd need to look again. I would fight the urge, and maybe resist for a moment or two. But I would end up looking, no matter how hard I resisted. At least I wasn't *talking* to it, like Gringo was starting to do.

I blamed the Coke boy for everything. I blamed him for the craziness of the war. I blamed him for the heat and the sweat and the dust and the fear. I blamed him for the men we had lost, and I blamed him for the men we were going to lose. I didn't know what to believe. Had we killed him or not? Was it the same boy or not?

The next time he appeared, I was ready. It was the same kid all right: straw hat, dirty shirt, red shorts, Coke tray. I killed him myself that time. Bayoneted him, and twisted it around real good to make sure he was dead. Then I smashed every last bottle with my rifle butt. He was back again the next day. I don't remember who killed him that time. Needless to say, we got our asses kicked soon after each appearance.

I guess I was on my way to a Section 8. Mental case, that is. Probably would have ended up that way, except that I requested and received a transfer out of there. I was lucky to get that transfer, damn near everyone wanted out. Guess I was the lucky one cause it was always me the kid spoke to: "Hey GI, you want?" I didn't know what I wanted anymore.

I ended up with my gear in the rear. Something like 90 percent of the troops had rear echelon jobs. Thanks to the Coke boy, I got to join them. Worked in S-4 supply, mostly just filling out forms. Got me a cot with clean sheets and a mosquito net. Man, did I have it made. Life couldn't have been better. Sure, I had nightmares and insomnia and all that sort of stuff, but that was a small price to pay for staying alive. I was safe in the rear, the base hadn't been hit in months. The only fighting I saw was the time I got into a price haggle with Mr. Charles' little sister.

I put in my time, did my job, and never gave anything a second thought, except maybe the Coke boy. Then he reappeared.

It was late in the evening, and I was on my way to the enlisted men's club. My feet kicked up little clouds of dust as I walked past neat rows of sandbagged bunkers and tin hooches. My thoughts were of ice-cold beer and round-eyed women, for I hoped a Red Cross girl or two would be at the club. The last thing in the world I was expecting was that godawful question: "Hey GI, you want?"

I couldn't believe it, but there he was, standing in the shadows. *Damn* that kid! I had no rifle, I had no grenade, I had no bayonet. So I smashed his head to pulp on the exposed beam of a bunker. And I smashed every last Coke bottle. They felt ice cold. Sort of like the blood in my veins when we got mortared that night.

This time, there was an investigation. There had been no official inquiry before, but there had been plenty of rumors. I was the obvious

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suspect, and they called me in for questioning. It had been dark and no one had seen or heard me. I knew they couldn't pin it on me, and they knew it too. All they could do was give me another transfer. Back to the field.

My new unit was another line company. My first night there, we were circled up in a defensive position, barbed wire and foxholes, the whole shebang. Word had it we were to expect Mr. Charles sometime in the night. More than a hundred men were spread around our perimeter. Most were likely scared half to death, thinking about ol' Mr. Charles creeping through all that wire. Not me. I was daydreaming about mushroom clouds and sizzling, melting green glass. There would be the Coke boy, and there *I* would be with a nuclear hand grenade. Rumor had it the army had such grenades; supposedly they could blow a crater a hundred meters in diameter. Trouble was, you could only throw it about twenty meters. I paid no attention to such petty details. I'd nuke that kid for sure, and I'd kick back watching that beautiful mushroom cloud. If that didn't stop him, nothing would.

So I'm just sitting there in twilight gloom when I hear—you guessed it—"Hey GI, you want?"

It was almost dark, and I could barely make him out. He seemed to be expecting something. I fingered the safety on my rifle. God, I was tired, so very tired. I just didn't have the energy to lift that rifle and blow him away.

Then he spoke again: "GI, you want, yes?" It was the first time he had asked twice.

Yes, I wanted. I handed him a sweat-soaked dollar, and he smiled broadly as he opened and passed a bottle. Yes sir, it was the real McCoy, green dewy glass, ice-cold, just like at the old ball game. I raised the bottle in salute to the boy, who grinned back. Then I lowered it to my lips, and guzzled it right down. Man, I'm telling you, it was good. Closed my eyes to savor it, and when I looked again, the boy was gone. Vanished.

I set the bottle down, being careful not to disturb its reality. I felt strangely at peace as I settled down in my hole, tilting my helmet back to cradle my head. Time to catch up on missing sleep. I knew Mr. Charles wasn't comin' that night, and I was right. Of course, I never saw the Coke boy again.

That was twenty years ago. I still have the empty Coke bottle; it's at home on my desk. Our beer and soda always came in cans, not bottles. There is simply no way to explain it. The bottle is real, and I'm real, but what was the Coke boy? And what was the war? Damned if I know. ●

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THE WITCH'S DECLARATION OF LOVE FOR DOROTHY

by Lawrence Person

Come to me
My pretty,
With your black hair and blue eyes.
Let me share with you
The darkness
That burns in my heart.

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The murder? I forgive you.
What is one sister less, more or less?
We are all little more
Than husks these days,
And I mourn not for the passing
Of that bitter flesh.

You think yourself lonely?
Come, and I'll let you taste the bitter fruits
Of a thousand years of solitude
With nothing but the chatter of monkeys
To keep me company.

If you could feel
The weight of those Eons
Perhaps you would have some inkling
Of how much I despise you,
And in despite, love you,
For you are everything I am not
And everything I shall never be.

Come, share an hour with me before you die
And we shall have a dialogue, you and I.
Feeling a bit sleepy, are we?
Don't worry.
You shall have time enough to rest anon.

Please forgive me if I don't join you.
(There's no rest for the wicked.)
Still, there are times I wonder,
And long for that sleep.
Tell me, my pretty, what secrets are yours in dreams?
Will you tell me,
Sweet Dorothy,
What it is like to die?

Come to me, my pretty.
And let there be an end to one of us.

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GRIFFIN'S EGG

by Michael Swanwick

Arkham House has just published *Gravity's Angels*. a collection of short stories by Michael Swanwick. Some of the author's other short tales (which were written in collaboration with Gardner Dozois and others) recently appeared in Mr. Dozois's collection of stories, *Slow Dancing Through Time* (Ursus Imprints/Ziesing). While Mr. Swanwick is currently working on his first fantasy novel, the following tale is a truly scintillating and thought-provoking hard SF story.

art: Gary Freeman

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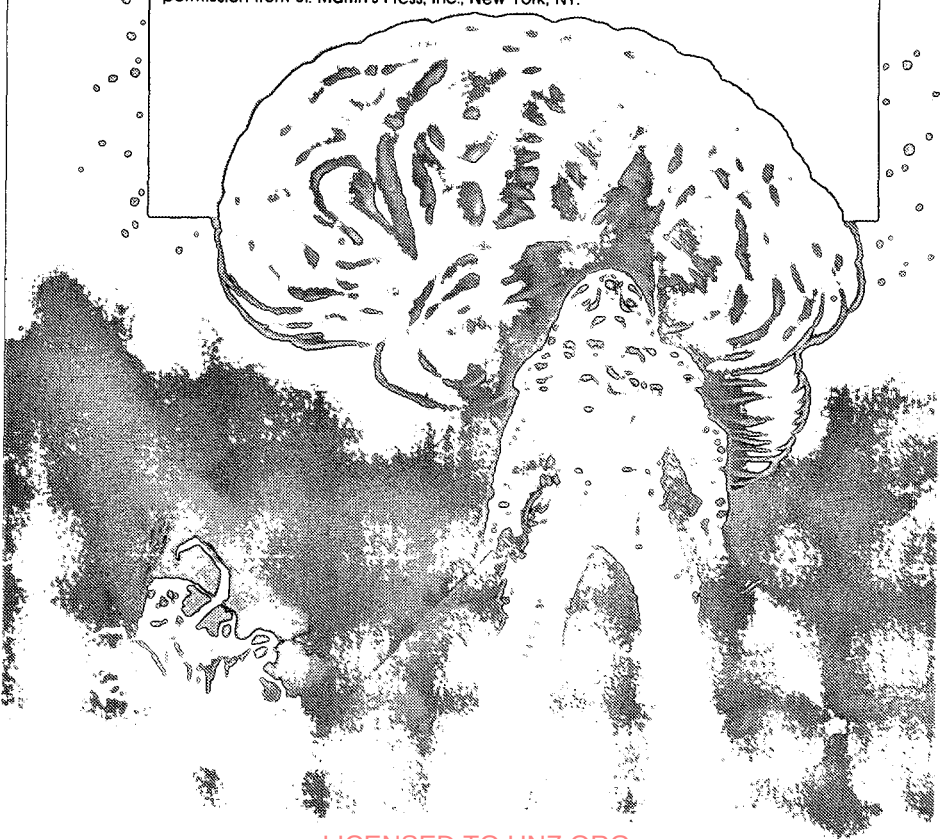

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The moon? It is a griffin's egg,
Hatching to-morrow night.
And how the little boys will watch
With shouting and delight
To see him break the shell and stretch
And creep across the sky.
The boys will laugh. The little girls,
I fear, may hide and cry . . .

Vachel Lindsay

The sun cleared the mountains. Gunther Weil raised a hand in salute, then winced as the glare hit his eyes in the instant it took his helmet to polarize.

He was hauling fuel rods to Chatterjee Crater industrial park. The Chatterjee B reactor had gone critical forty hours before dawn, taking fifteen remotes and a microwave relay with it, and putting out a power surge that caused collateral damage to every factory in the park. Fortunately, the occasional meltdown was designed into the system. By the time the sun rose over the Rhaeticus highlands, a new reactor had been built and was ready to go online.

Gunther drove automatically, gauging his distance from Bootstrap by the amount of trash lining the Mare Vaporum road. Close by the city, discarded construction machinery and damaged assemblers sat in open-vacuum storage, awaiting possible salvage. Ten kilometers out, a pressurized van had exploded, scattering machine parts and giant worms of insulating foam across the landscape. At twenty-five kilometers, a poorly graded stretch of road had claimed any number of cargo skids and shattered running lights from passing traffic.

Forty kilometers out, though, the road was clear, a straight, clean gash in the dirt. Ignoring the voices at the back of his skull, the traffic chatter and automated safety messages that the truck routinely fed into his transceiver chip, he scrolled up the topographicals on the dash.

Right about here.

Gunther turned off the Mare Vaporum road and began laying tracks over virgin soil. "You've left your prescheduled route," the truck said. "Deviations from schedule may only be made with the recorded permission of your dispatcher."

"Yeah, well." Gunther's voice seemed loud in his helmet, the only physical sound in a babel of ghosts. He'd left the cabin unpressurized, and the insulated layers of his suit stilled even the conduction rumbling from the treads. "You and I both know that so long as I don't fall too far behind schedule, Beth Hamilton isn't going to care if I stray a little in between."

"You have exceeded this unit's linguistic capabilities."

"That's okay, don't let it bother you." Deftly he tied down the send switch on the truck radio with a twist of wire. The voices in his head abruptly died. He was completely isolated now.

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"You said you wouldn't do that again." The words, broadcast directly to his trance chip, sounded as deep and resonant as the voice of God. "Generation Five policy expressly requires that all drivers maintain constant radio—"

"Don't whine. It's unattractive."

"You have exceeded this unit's linguistic—"

"Oh, shut up." Gunther ran a finger over the topographical maps, tracing the course he'd plotted the night before: Thirty kilometers over cherry soil, terrain no human or machine had ever crossed before, and then north on Murchison road. With luck he might even manage to be at Chatterjee early.

He drove into the lunar plain. Rocks sailed by to either side. Ahead, the mountains grew imperceptibly. Save for the treadmarks dwindling behind him, there was nothing from horizon to horizon to show that humanity had ever existed. The silence was perfect.

Gunther lived for moments like this. Entering that clean, desolate emptiness, he experienced a vast expansion of being, as if everything he saw, stars, plain, craters and all, were encompassed within himself. Bootstrap City was only a fading dream, a distant island on the gently rolling surface of a stone sea. Nobody will ever be first here again, he thought. Only me.

A memory floated up from his childhood. It was Christmas Eve and he was in his parents' car, on the way to midnight Mass. Snow was falling, thickly and windlessly, rendering all the familiar roads of Düsseldorf clean and pure under sheets of white. His father drove, and he himself leaned over the front seat to stare ahead in fascination into this peaceful, transformed world. The silence was perfect.

He felt touched by solitude and made holy.

The truck plowed through a rainbow of soft greys, submerged hues more hints than colors, as if something bright and festive held itself hidden just beneath a coating of dust. The sun was at his shoulder, and when he spun the front axle to avoid a boulder, the truck's shadow wheeled and reached for infinity. He drove reflexively, mesmerized by the austere beauty of the passing land.

At a thought, his peecee put music on his chip. "Stormy Weather" filled the universe.

He was coming down a long, almost imperceptible slope when the controls went dead in his hands. The truck powered down and coasted to a stop. "Goddamn you, you asshole machine!" he snarled. "What is it this time?"

"The land ahead is impassible."

Gunther slammed a fist on the dash, making the maps dance. The land ahead was smooth and sloping, any unruly tendencies tamed eons ago by the Mare Imbrium explosion. Sissy stuff. He kicked the door open and clambered down.

The truck had been stopped by a baby rille: a snakelike depression

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meandering across his intended route, looking for all the world like a dry streambed. He bounded to its edge. It was fifteen meters across, and three meters down at its deepest. Just shallow enough that it wouldn't show up on the topos. Gunther returned to the cab, slamming the door noiselessly behind him.

"Look. The sides aren't very steep. I've been down worse a hundred times. We'll just take it slow and easy, okay?"

"The land ahead is impassible," the truck said. "Please return to the originally scheduled course."

Wagner was on now. *Tannhauser*. Impatiently, he thought it off.

"If you're so damned heuristic, then why won't you ever listen to reason?" He chewed his lip angrily, gave a quick shake of his head. "No, going back would put us way off schedule. The rille is bound to peter out in a few hundred meters. Let's just follow it until it does, then angle back to Murchison. We'll be at the park in no time."

Three hours later he finally hit the Murchison road. By then he was sweaty and smelly and his shoulders ached with tension. "Where are we?" he asked sourly. Then, before the truck could answer, "Cancel that." The soil had turned suddenly black. That would be the ejecta fantail from the Sony-Reinpfaltz mine. Their railgun was oriented almost due south in order to avoid the client factories, and so their tailings hit the road first. That meant he was getting close.

Murchison was little more than a confluence of truck treads, a dirt track crudely leveled and marked by blazes of orange paint on nearby boulders. In quick order Gunther passed through a series of landmarks: Harada Industrial fantail, Sea of Storms Macrofacturing fantail, Krupp funfzig fantail. He knew them all. G5 did the robotics for the lot.

A light flatbed carrying a shipped bulldozer sped past him, kicking up a spray of dust that fell as fast as pebbles. The remote driving it waved a spindly arm in greeting. He waved back automatically, and wondered if it was anybody he knew.

The land hereabouts was hacked and gouged, dirt and boulders shoved into careless heaps and hills, the occasional tool station or Oxytank Emergency Storage Platform chopped into a nearby bluff. A sign floated by: TOILET FLUSHING FACILITIES ½ KILOMETER. He made a face. Then he remembered that his radio was still off and slipped the loop of wire from it. Time to rejoin the real world. Immediately his dispatcher's voice, harsh and staticky, was relayed to his trance chip.

"—ofabitch! *Weil!* Where the fuck are you?"

"I'm right here, Beth. A little late, but right where I'm supposed to be."

"Sonofa—" The recording shut off, and Hamilton's voice came on, live and mean. "You'd better have a real good explanation for this one, honey."

"Oh, you know how it is." Gunther looked away from the road, off into the dusty jade highlands. He'd like to climb up into them and never come

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back. Perhaps he would find caves. Perhaps there were monsters: vacuum trolls and moondragons with metabolisms slow and patient, taking centuries to move one body's-length, hyperdense beings that could swim through stone as if it were water. He pictured them diving, following lines of magnetic force deep, deep into veins of diamond and plutonium, heads back and singing. "I picked up a hitchhiker, and we kind of got involved."

"Try telling that to E. Izmailova. She's mad as hornets at you."

"Who?"

"Izmailova. She's the new demolitions jock, shipped up here on a multicorporate contract. Took a hopper in almost four hours ago, and she's been waiting for you and Siegfried ever since. I take it you've never met her?"

"No."

"Well, I have, and you'd better watch your step with her. She's exactly the kind of tough broad who won't be amused by your antics."

"Aw, come on, she's just another tech on a retainer, right? Not in my line of command. It's not like she can do anything to me."

"Dream on, babe. It wouldn't take much pull to get a fuckup like you sent down to Earth."

The sun was only a finger's breadth over the highlands by the time Chatterjee A loomed into sight. Gunther glanced at it every now and then, apprehensively. With his visor adjusted to the H-alpha wavelength, it was a blazing white sphere covered with slowly churning black specks: More granular than usual. Sunspot activity seemed high. He wondered that the Radiation Forecast Facility hadn't posted a surface advisory. The guys at the Observatory were usually right on top of things.

Chatterjee A, B, and C were a triad of simple craters just below Chladni, and while the smaller two were of minimal interest, Chatterjee A was the child of a meteor that had punched through the Imbrian basalts to as sweet a vein of aluminum ore as anything in the highlands. Being so convenient to Bootstrap made it one of management's darlings, and Gunther was not surprised to see that Kerr-McGee was going all out to get their reactor online again.

The park was crawling with walkers, stalkers, and assemblers. They were all over the blister-domed factories, the smelteries, loading docks, and vacuum garages. Constellations of blue sparks winked on and off as major industrial constructs were dismantled. Fleets of heavily loaded trucks fanned out into the lunar plain, churning up the dirt behind them. Fats Waller started to sing "The Joint is Jumping" and Gunther laughed.

He slowed to a crawl, swung wide to avoid a gas-plater that was being wrangled onto a loader, and cut up the Chatterjee B ramp road. A new landing pad had been blasted from the rock just below the lip, and a cluster of people stood about a hopper resting there. One human and eight remotes.

One of the remotes was speaking, making choppy little gestures with

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its arms. Several stood inert, identical as so many antique telephones, unclaimed by Earthside management but available should more advisors need to be called online.

Gunther unstrapped Siegfried from the roof of the cab and, control pad in one hand and cable spool in the other, walked him toward the hopper.

The human strode out to meet him. "You! What kept you?" E. Izmailova wore a jazzy red-and-orange Studio Volga boutique suit, in sharp contrast to his own company-issue suit with the G5 logo on the chest. He could not make out her face through the gold visor glass. But he could hear it in her voice: blazing eyes, thin lips.

"I had a flat tire." He found a good smooth chunk of rock and set down the cable spool, wriggling it to make sure it sat flush. "We got maybe five hundred yards of shielded cable. That enough for you?"

A short, tense nod.

"Okay." He unholstered his bolt gun. "Stand back." Kneeling, he anchored the spool to the rock. Then he ran a quick check of the unit's functions. "Do we know what it's like in there?"

A remote came to life, stepped forward and identified himself as Don Sakai, of G5's crisis management team. Gunther had worked with him before: a decent tough guy, but like most Canadians he had an exaggerated fear of nuclear energy. "Ms. Lang here, of Sony-Reinpfaltz, walked her unit in but the radiation was so strong she lost control after a preliminary scan." A second remote nodded confirmation, but the relay time to Toronto was just enough that Sakai missed it. "The remote just kept on walking." He coughed nervously, then added unnecessarily, "The autonomous circuits were too sensitive."

"Well, that's not going to be a problem with Siegfried. He's as dumb as a rock. On the evolutionary scale of machine intelligence he ranks closer to a crowbar than a computer." Two and a half seconds passed, and then Sakai laughed politely. Gunther nodded to Izmailova. "Walk me through this. Tell me what you want."

Izmailova stepped to his side, their suits pressing together briefly as she jacked a patch cord into his control pad. Vague shapes flickered across the outside of her visor like the shadows of dreams. "Does he know what he's doing?" she asked.

"Hey, I—"

"Shut up, Weil," Hamilton growled on a private circuit. Openly, she said, "He wouldn't be here if the company didn't have full confidence in his technical skills."

"I'm sure there's never been any question—" Sakai began. He lapsed into silence as Hamilton's words belatedly reached him.

"There's a device on the hopper," Izmailova said to Gunther. "Go pick it up."

He obeyed, reconfiguring Siegfried for a small, dense load. The unit bent low over the hopper, wrapping large, sensitive hands about the device. Gunther applied gentle pressure. Nothing happened. Heavy little bugger. Slowly, carefully, he upped the power. Siegfried straightened.

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"Up the road, then down inside."

The reactor was unrecognizable, melted, twisted and folded in upon itself, a mound of slag with twisting pipes sprouting from the edges. There had been a coolant explosion early in the incident, and one wall of the crater was bright with sprayed metal. "Where is the radioactive material?" Sakai asked. Even though he was a third of a million kilometers away, he sounded tense and apprehensive.

"It's all radioactive," Izmailova said.

They waited. "I mean, you know. The fuel rods?"

"Right now, your fuel rods are probably three hundred meters down and still going. We are talking about fissionable material that has achieved critical mass. Very early in the process the rods will have all melted together in a sort of superhot puddle, capable of burning its way through rock. Picture it as a dense, heavy blob of wax, slowly working its way toward the lunar core."

"God, I love physics," Gunther said.

Izmailova's helmet turned toward him, abruptly blank. After a long pause, it switched on again and turned away. "The road down is clear at least. Take your unit all the way to the end. There's an exploratory shaft to one side there. Old one. I want to see if it's still open."

"Will the one device be enough?" Sakai asked. "To clean up the crater, I mean."

The woman's attention was fixed on Siegfried's progress. In a distracted tone she said, "Mr. Sakai, putting a chain across the access road would be enough to clean up this site. The crater walls would shield anyone working nearby from the gamma radiation, and it would take no effort at all to reroute hopper overflights so their passengers would not be exposed. Most of the biological danger of a reactor meltdown comes from alpha radiation emitted by particulate radioisotopes in the air or water. When concentrated in the body, alpha-emitters can do considerable damage; elsewhere, no. Alpha particles can be stopped by a sheet of paper. So long as you keep a reactor out of your ecosystem, it's as safe as any other large machine. Burying a destroyed reactor just because it is radioactive is unnecessary and, if you will forgive me for saying so, superstitious. But I don't make policy. I just blow things up."

"Is this the shaft you're looking for?" Gunther asked.

"Yes. Walk it down to the bottom. It's not far."

Gunther switched on Siegfried's chestlight, and sank a roller relay so the cable wouldn't snag. They went down. Finally Izmailova said, "Stop. That's far enough." He gently set the device down and then, at her direction, flicked the arming toggle. "That's done," Izmailova said. "Bring your unit back. I've given you an hour to put some distance between the crater and yourself." Gunther noticed that the remotes, on automatic, had already begun walking away.

"Um . . . I've still got fuel rods to load."

"Not today you don't. The new reactor has been taken back apart and hauled out of the blasting zone."

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Gunther thought now of all the machinery being disassembled and removed from the industrial park, and was struck for the first time by the operation's sheer extravagances of scale. Normally only the most sensitive devices were removed from a blasting area. "Wait a minute. Just what kind of monster explosive are you planning to *use?*"

There was a self-conscious cockiness to Izmailova's stance. "Nothing I don't know how to handle. This is a diplomat-class device, the same design as saw action five years ago. Nearly one hundred individual applications without a single mechanical failure. That makes it the most reliable weapon in the history of warfare. You should feel privileged having the chance to work with one."

Gunther felt his flesh turn to ice. "Jesus Mother of God," he said. "You had me handling a briefcase nuke."

"Better get used to it. Westinghouse Lunar is putting these little babies into mass production. We'll be cracking open mountains with them, blasting roads through the highlands, smashing apart the rille walls to see what's inside." Her voice took on a visionary tone. "And that's just the beginning. There are plans for enrichment fields in Sinus Aestum. Explode a few bombs over the regolith, then extract plutonium from the dirt. We're going to be the fuel dump for the entire solar system."

His dismay must have shown in his stance, for Izmailova laughed. "Think of it as weapons for peace."

"You should've been there!" Gunther said. "It was unfuckabelievable. The one side of the crater just disappeared. It dissolved into nothing. Smashed to dust. And for a real long time everything *glowed!* Craters, machines, everything. My visor was so close to overload it started flickering. I thought it was going to burn out. It was nuts." He picked up his cards. "Who dealt this mess?"

Krishna grinned shyly and ducked his head. "I'm in."

Hiro scowled down at his cards. "I've just died and gone to Hell."

"Trade you," Anya said.

"No, I deserve to suffer."

They were in Noguchi Park by the edge of the central lake, seated on artfully scattered boulders that had been carved to look water-eroded. A kneehigh forest of baby birches grew to one side, and somebody's toy sailboat floated near the impact cone at the center of the lake. Honeybees mazily browsed the clover.

"And then, just as the wall was crumbling, this crazy Russian bitch—"

Anya ditched a trey. "Watch what you say about crazy Russian bitches."

"—goes zooming up on her hopper . . ."

"I saw it on television," Hiro said. "We all did. It was news. This guy who works for Nissan told me the BBC gave it thirty seconds." He'd broken his nose in karate practice, when he'd flinched into his instructor's punch, and the contrast of square white bandage with shaggy black eyebrows gave him a surly, piratical appearance.

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Gunther discarded one. "Hit me. Man, you didn't see anything. You didn't feel the ground shake afterward."

"Just what was Izmailova's connection with the Briefcase War?" Hiro asked. "Obviously not a courier. Was she in the supply end or strategic?"

Gunther shrugged.

"You do remember the Briefcase War?" Hiro said sarcastically. "Half of Earth's military elites taken out in a single day? The world pulled back from the brink of war by bold action? Suspected terrorists revealed as global heroes?"

Gunther remembered the Briefcase War quite well. He had been nineteen at the time, working on a Finlandia Geothermal project when the whole world had gone into spasm and very nearly destroyed itself. It had been a major factor in his decision to ship off the planet. "Can't we ever talk about anything but politics? I'm sick and tired of hearing about Armageddon."

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be meeting with Hamilton?" Anya asked suddenly.

He glanced up at the Earth. The east coast of South America was just crossing the dusk terminator. "Oh, hell, there's enough time to play out the hand."

Krishna won with three queens. The deal passed to Hiro. He shuffled quickly, and slapped the cards down with angry little punches of his arm. "Okay," Anya said, "what's eating you?"

He looked up angrily, then down again and in a muffled voice, as if he had abruptly gone bashful as Krishna, said, "I'm shipping home."

"Home?"

"You mean to Earth?"

"Are you crazy? With everything about to go up in flames? *Why?*"

"Because I am so fucking tired of the Moon. It has to be the ugliest place in the universe."

"Ugly?" Anya looked elaborately about at the terraced gardens, the streams that began at the top level and fell in eight misty waterfalls before reaching the central pond to be recirculated again, the gracefully winding pathways. People strolled through great looping rosebushes and past towers of forsythia with the dreamlike skimming stride that made moonwalking so like motion underwater. Others popped in and out of the office tunnels, paused to watch the finches loop and fly, tended to beds of cucumbers. At the midlevel straw market, the tents where offduty hobby capitalists sold factory systems, grass baskets, orange glass paperweights and courses in postinterpretive dance and the meme analysis of Elizabethan poetry, were a jumble of brave silks, turquoise, scarlet, and aquamarine. "I think it looks nice. A little crowded, maybe, but that's the pioneer aesthetic."

"It looks like a shopping mall, but that's not what I'm talking about. It's—" He groped for words. "It's like—it's what we're doing to this world that bothers me. I mean, we're digging it up, scattering garbage about, ripping the mountains apart, and for what?"

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"Money," Anya said. "Consumer goods, raw materials, a future for our children. What's wrong with that?"

"We're not building a future, we're building weapons."

"There's not so much as a handgun on the Moon. It's an intercorporate development zone. Weapons are illegal here."

"You know what I mean. All those bomber fuselages, detonation systems, and missile casings that get built here, and shipped to low Earth orbit. Let's not pretend we don't know what they're for."

"So?" Anya said sweetly. "We live in the real world, we're none of us naïve enough to believe you can have governments without armies. Why is it worse that these things are being built here rather than elsewhere?"

"It's the short-sighted, egocentric greed of what we're doing that gripes me! Have you peeked out on the surface lately and seen the way it's being ripped open, torn apart, and scattered about? There are still places where you can gaze upon a harsh beauty unchanged since the days our ancestors were swinging in trees. But we're trashing them. In a generation, two at most, there will be no more beauty to the Moon than there is to any other garbage dump."

"You've seen what Earthbound manufacturing has done to the environment," Anya said. "Moving it off the planet is a good thing, right?"

"Yes, but the Moon—"

"Doesn't even *have* an ecosphere. There's nothing here to harm."

They glared at each other. Finally Hiro said, "I don't want to talk about it," and sullenly picked up his cards.

Five or six hands later, a woman wandered up and plumped to the grass by Krishna's feet. Her eye shadow was vivid electric purple, and a crazy smile burned on her face. "Oh hi," Krishna said. "Does everyone here know Sally Chang? She's a research component of the Center for Self-Replicating Technologies, like me."

The others nodded. Gunther said, "Gunther Weil. Blue collar component of Generation Five."

She giggled.

Gunther blinked. "You're certainly in a good mood." He rapped the deck with his knuckles. "I'll stand."

"I'm on psilly," she said.

"One card."

"Psilocybin?" Gunther said. "I might be interested in some of that. Did you grow it or microfacture it? I have a couple of factories back in my room, maybe I could divert one if you'd like to license the software?"

Sally Chang shook her head, laughing helplessly. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Well, when you come down we can talk about it." Gunther squinted at his cards. "This would make a great hand for chess."

"Nobody plays chess," Hiro said scornfully. "It's a game for computers."

Gunther took the pot with two pair. He shuffled, Krishna declined the

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cut, and he began dealing out cards. "So anyway, this crazy Russian lady—"

Out of nowhere, Chang howled. Wild gusts of laughter knocked her back on her heels and bent her forward again. The delight of discovery dancing in her eyes, she pointed a finger straight at Gunther. "You're a robot!" she cried.

"Beg pardon?"

"You're nothing but a robot," she repeated. "You're a machine, an automaton. Look at yourself! Nothing but stimulus-response. You have no free will at all. There's nothing there. You couldn't perform an original act to save your life."

"Oh yeah?" Gunther glanced around, looking for inspiration. A little boy—it might be Pyotr Nahfees, though it was hard to tell from here—was by the edge of the water, feeding scraps of shrimp loaf to the carp. "Suppose I pitched you into the lake? That would be an original act."

Laughing, she shook her head. "Typical primate behavior. A perceived threat is met with a display of mock aggression."

Gunther laughed.

"Then, when that fails, the primate falls back to a display of submission. Appeasal. The monkey demonstrates his harmlessness—you see?"

"Hey, this really isn't funny," Gunther said warningly. "In fact, it's kind of insulting."

"And so back to a display of aggression."

Gunther sighed and threw up both his hands. "How am I supposed to react? According to you, anything I say or do is wrong."

"Submission again. Back and forth, back and forth from aggression to submission and back again." She pumped her arm as if it were a piston. "Just like a little machine—you see? It's all automatic behavior."

"Hey, Kreesh—you're the neurobiowhatever here, right? Put in a good word for me. Get me out of this conversation."

Krishna reddened. He would not meet Gunther's eyes. "Ms. Chang is very highly regarded at the Center, you see. Anything she thinks about thinking is worth thinking about." The woman watched him avidly, eyes glistening, pupils small. "I think maybe what she means, though, is that we're all basically cruising through life. Like we're on autopilot. Not just you specifically, but all of us." He appealed to her directly. "Yes?"

"No, no, no, no." She shook her head. "Him specifically."

"I give up." Gunther put his cards down, and lay back on the granite slab so he could stare up through the roof glass at the waning Earth. When he closed his eyes, he could see Izmailova's hopper, rising. It was a skimpy device, little more than a platform-and-chair atop a cluster of four bottles of waste-gas propellant, and a set of smart legs. He saw it lofting up as the explosion blossomed, seeming briefly to hover high over the crater, like a hawk atop a thermal. Hands by side, the red-suited figure sat, watching with what seemed inhuman calm. In the reflected

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light she burned as bright as a star. In an appalling way, she was beautiful.

Sally Chang hugged her knees, rocking back and forth. She laughed and laughed.

Beth Hamilton was wired for telepresence. She flipped up one lens when Gunther entered her office, but kept on moving her arms and legs. Dreamy little ghost motions that would be picked up and magnified in a factory somewhere over the horizon. "You're late again," she said with no particular emphasis.

Most people would have experienced at least a twinge of reality sickness dealing with two separate surrounds at once. Hamilton was one of the rare few who could split her awareness between two disparate realities without loss of efficiency in either. "I called you in to discuss your future with Generation Five. Specifically, to discuss the possibility of your transfer to another plant."

"You mean Earthside."

"You see?" Hamilton said. "You're not as stupid as you like to make yourself out to be." She flipped the lens down again, stood very still, then lifted a metal-gauntleted hand and ran through a complex series of finger movements. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Tokyo, Berlin, Buenos Aires—do any of these hold magic for you? How about Toronto? The right move now could be a big boost to your career."

"All I want is to stay here, do my job, and draw down my salary," Gunther said carefully. "I'm not looking for a shot at promotion, or a big raise, or a lateral career-track transfer. I'm happy right where I am."

"You've sure got a funny way of showing it." Hamilton powered down her gloves and slipped her hands free. She scratched her nose. To one side stood her work table, a polished cube of black granite. Her peecee rested there, alongside a spray of copper crystals. At her thought, it put Izmailova's voice onto Gunther's chip.

"It is with deepest regret that I must alert you to the unprofessional behavior of one of your personnel components," it began. Listening to the complaint, Gunther experienced a totally unexpected twinge of distress and, more, of resentment that Izmailova had dared judge him so harshly. He was careful not to let it show.

"Irresponsible, insubordinate, careless, and possessed of a bad attitude." He faked a grin. "She doesn't seem to like me much." Hamilton said nothing. "But this isn't enough to . . ." His voice trailed off. "Is it?"

"Normally, Weil, it would be. A demo jock isn't 'just a tech on retainer,' as you so quaintly put it; those government licenses aren't easy to get. And you may not be aware of it, but you have very poor efficiency ratings to begin with. Lots of potential, no follow-through. Frankly, you've been a disappointment. However, lucky for you, this Izmailova dame humiliated

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Don Sakai, and he's let us know that we're under no particular pressure to accommodate her."

"Izmailova humiliated Sakai?"

Hamilton stared at him. "Weil, you're oblivious, you know that?"

Then he remembered Izmailova's rant on nuclear energy. "Right, okay. I got it now."

"So here's your choice. I can write up a reprimand, and it goes into your permanent file, along with Izmailova's complaint. Or you can take a lateral Earthside, and I'll see to it that these little things aren't logged into the corporate system."

It wasn't much of a choice. But he put a good face on it. "In that case it looks like you're stuck with me."

"For the moment, Weil. For the moment."

He was back on the surface the next two days running. The first day he was once again hauling fuel rods to Chatterjee C. This time he kept to the road, and the reactor was refueled exactly on schedule. The second day he went all the way out to Triesnecker to pick up some old rods that had been in temporary storage for six months while the Kerr-McGee people argued over whether they should be reprocessed or dumped. Not a bad deal for him, because although the sunspot cycle was on the wane, there was a surface advisory in effect and he was drawing hazardous duty pay.

When he got there, a tech rep telepresenced in from somewhere in France to tell him to forget it. There'd been another meeting, and the decision had once again been delayed. He started back to Bootstrap with the new a capella version of the *Threepenny Opera* playing in his head. It sounded awfully sweet and reedy for his tastes, but that was what they were listening to up home.

Fifteen kilometers down the road, the UV meter on the dash *jumped.*

Gunther reached out to tap the meter with his finger. It did not respond. With a freezing sensation at the back of his neck, he glanced up at the roof of the cab and whispered, "Oh, no."

"The Radiation Forecast Facility has just intensified its surface warning to a Most Drastic status," the truck said calmly. "This is due to an unanticipated flare storm, onset immediately. Everyone currently on the surface is to proceed with all haste to shelter. Repeat: Proceed immediately to shelter."

"I'm eighty kilometers from—"

The truck was slowing to a stop. "Because this unit is not hardened, excessive fortuitous radiation may cause it to malfunction. To ensure the continued safe operation of this vehicle, all controls will be frozen in manual mode and this unit will now shut off."

With the release of the truck's masking functions, Gunther's head filled with overlapping voices. Static washed through them, making nonsense of what they were trying to say:

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"Beth! The nearest shelter is back at Weisskopf—that's half an hour at top speed and I've got an advisory here of twenty minutes. Tell me what to do!"

But the first sleet of hard particles was coming in too hard to make out anything more. A hand, his apparently, floated forward and flicked off the radio relay. The voices in his head died.

The crackling static went on and on. The truck sat motionless, half an hour from nowhere, invisible death sizzling and popping down through the cab roof. He put his helmet and gloves on, doublechecked their seals, and unlatched the door.

It slammed open. Pages from the op manual flew away, and a glove went tumbling gaily across the surface, chasing the pink fuzzy-dice that Eurydice had given him that last night in Sweden. A handful of wheat biscuits in an open tin on the dash turned to powder and were gone, drawing the tin after them. Explosive decompression. He'd forgotten to depressurize. Gunther froze in dismayed astonishment at having made so basic—so dangerous—a mistake.

Then he was on the surface, head tilted back, staring up at the sun. It was angry with sunspots, and one enormous and unpredicted solar flare.

I'm going to die, he thought.

For a long, paralyzing instant, he tasted the chill certainty of that thought. He was going to die. He knew that for a fact, knew it more surely than he had ever known anything before.

In his mind, he could see Death sweeping across the lunar plain toward him. Death was a black wall, featureless, that stretched to infinity in every direction. It sliced the universe in half. On this side were life, warmth, craters and flowers, dreams, mining robots, thought, everything that Gunther knew or could imagine. On the other side . . . something? Nothing? The wall gave no hint. It was unreadable, enigmatic, absolute.

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But it was bearing down on him. It was so close now that he could almost reach out and touch it. Soon it would be here. He would pass through, and then he would know.

With a start he broke free of that thought, and jumped for the cab. He scrabbled up its side. His trance chip hissing, rattling and crackling, he yanked the magnetic straps holding Siegfried in place, grabbed the spool and control pad, and jumped over the edge.

He landed jarringly, fell to his knees, and rolled under the trailer. There was enough shielding wrapped around the fuel rods to stop any amount of hard radiation—no matter what its source. It would shelter him as well from the sun as from his cargo. The trance chip fell silent, and he felt his jaws relaxing from a clenched tension.

Safe.

It was dark beneath the trailer, and he had time to think. Even kicking his rebreather up to full, and offlining all his suit peripherals, he didn't have enough oxygen to sit out the storm. So okay. He had to get to a shelter. Weisskopf was closest, only fifteen kilometers away and there was a shelter in the G5 assembly plant there. That would be his goal.

Working by feel, he found the steel supporting struts, and used Siegfried's magnetic straps to attach himself to the underside of the trailer. It was clumsy, difficult work, but at last he hung face-down over the road. He fingered the walker's controls, and sat Siegfried up.

Twelve excruciating minutes later, he finally managed to get Siegfried down from the roof unbroken. The interior wasn't intended to hold anything half so big. To get the walker in he had first to cut the door free, and then rip the chair out of the cab. Discarding both items by the roadside, he squeezed Siegfried in. The walker bent over double, reconfigured, reconfigured again, and finally managed to fit itself into the space. Gently, delicately, Siegfried took the controls and shifted into first.

With a bump, the truck started to move.

It was a hellish trip. The truck, never fast to begin with, wallowed down the road like a cast-iron pig. Siegfried's optics were bent over the controls, and couldn't be raised without jerking the walker's hands free. He couldn't look ahead without stopping the truck first.

He navigated by watching the road pass under him. To a crude degree he could align the truck with the treadmarks scrolling by. Whenever he wandered off the track, he worked Siegfried's hand controls to veer the truck back, so that it drifted slowly from side to side, zig-zagging its way down the road.

Shadows bumping and leaping, the road flowed toward Gunther with dangerous monotony. He jiggled and vibrated in his makeshift sling. After a while his neck hurt with the effort of holding his head back to watch the glaring road disappearing into shadow by the front axle, and his eyes ached from the crawling repetitiveness of what they saw.

The truck kicked up dust in passing, and the smaller particles carried enough of a static charge to cling to his suit. At irregular intervals he

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swiped at the fine grey film on his visor with his glove, smearing it into long, thin streaks.

He began to hallucinate. They were mild visuals, oblong patches of colored light that moved in his vision and went away when he shook his head and firmly closed his eyes for a concentrated moment. But every moment's release from the pressure of vision tempted him to keep his eyes closed longer, and that he could not afford to do.

It put him in mind of the last time he had seen his mother, and what she had said then. That the worst part of being a widow was that every day her life began anew, no better than the day before, the pain still fresh, her husband's absence a physical fact she was no closer to accepting than ever. It was like being dead, she said, in that nothing ever changed.

Ah God, he thought, this isn't worth doing. Then a rock the size of his head came bounding toward his helmet. Frantic hands jerked at the controls, and Siegfried skewed the truck wildly, so that the rock jumped away and missed him. Which put an end to *that* line of thought.

He cued his peecee. *Saint James' Infirmary* came on. It didn't help.

Come on, you bastard, he thought. You can do it. His arms and shoulders ached, and his back too, when he gave it any thought. Perversely enough, one of his legs had gone to sleep. At the angle he had to hold his head to watch the road, his mouth tended to hang open. After a while, a quivering motion alerted him that a small puddle of saliva had gathered in the curve of his faceplate. He was drooling. He closed his mouth, swallowing back his spit, and stared forward. A minute later he found that he was doing it again.

Slowly, miserably, he drove toward Weisskopf.

The G5 Weisskopf plant was typical of its kind: A white blister-dome to moderate temperature swings over the long lunar day, a microwave relay tower to bring in supervisory presence, and a hundred semiautonomous units to do the work.

Gunther overshot the access road, wheeled back to catch it, and ran the truck right up to the side of the factory. He had Siegfried switch off the engine, and then let the control pad fall to the ground. For well over a minute he simply hung there, eyes closed, savoring the end of motion. Then he kicked free of the straps, and crawled out from under the trailer.

Static skatting and stuttering inside his head, he stumbled into the factory.

In the muted light that filtered through the dome covering, the factory was dim as an undersea cavern. His helmet light seemed to distort as much as it illumined. Machines loomed closer in the center of its glare, swelling up as if seen through a fisheye lens. He turned it off, and waited for his eyes to adjust.

After a bit, he could see the robot assemblers, slender as ghosts, moving with unearthly delicacy. The flare storm had activated them. They swayed like seaweed, lightly out of sync with each other. Arms raised, they danced in time to random radio input.

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On the assembly lines lay the remains of half-built robots, looking flayed and eviscerated. Their careful frettings of copper and silver nerves had been exposed to view and randomly operated upon. A long arm jointed down, electric fire at its tip, and made a metal torso twitch.

They were blind mechanisms, most of them, powerful things bolted to the floor in assembly logic paths. But there were mobile units as well, overseers and jacks-of-all-trades, weaving drunkenly through the factory with sun-maddened eye.

A sudden motion made Gunther turn just in time to see a metal puncher swivel toward him, slam down an enormous arm and put a hole in the floor by his feet. He felt the shock through his soles.

He danced back. The machine followed him, the diamond-tipped punch sliding nervously in and out of its sheath, its movements as trembling and dainty as a newborn colt's.

"Easy there, baby," Gunther whispered. To the far end of the factory, green arrows supergraffixed on the crater wall pointed to an iron door. The shelter. Gunther backed away from the punch, edging into a service aisle between two rows of machines that rippled like grass in the wind.

The punch press rolled forward on its trundle. Then, confused by that field of motion, it stopped, hesitantly scanning the ranks of robots. Gunther froze.

At last, slowly, lumberingly, the metal puncher turned away.

Gunther ran. Static roared in his head. Grey shadows swam among the distant machines, like sharks, sometimes coming closer, sometimes receding. The static loudened. Up and down the factory welding arcs winked on at the assembler tips, like tiny stars. Ducking, running, spinning, he reached the shelter and seized the airlock door. Even through his glove, the handle felt cold.

He turned it.

The airlock was small and round. He squeezed through the door and fit himself into the inadequate space within, making himself as small as possible. He yanked the door shut.

Darkness.

He switched his helmet lamp back on. The reflected glare slammed at his eyes, far too intense for such a confined area. Folded knees-to-chin into the roundness of the lock he felt a wry comradeship with Siegfried back in the truck.

The inner lock controls were simplicity itself. The door hinged inward, so that air pressure held it shut. There was a yank bar which, when pulled, would bleed oxygen into the airlock. When pressure equalized, the inner door would open easily. He yanked the bar.

The floor vibrated as something heavy went by.

The shelter was small, just large enough to hold a cot, a chemical toilet and a rebreather with spare oxytanks. A single overhead unit provided light and heat. For comfort there was a blanket. For amusement, there were pocket-sized editions of the Bible and the Koran, placed there by

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impossibly distant missionary societies. Even empty, there was not much space in the shelter.

It wasn't empty.

A woman, frowning and holding up a protective hand, cringed from his helmet lamp. "Turn that thing off," she said.

He obeyed. In the soft light that ensued he saw: stark white flattop, pink scalp visible through the sides. High cheekbones. Eyelids lifted slightly, like wings, by carefully sculpted eye shadow. Dark lips, full mouth. He had to admire the character it took to make up a face so carefully, only to hide it beneath a helmet. Then he saw her red and orange Studio Volga suit.

It was Izmailova.

To cover his embarrassment, he took his time removing his gloves and helmet. Izmailova moved her own helmet from the cot to make room, and he sat down beside her. Extending a hand, he stiffly said, "We've met before. My name is—"

"I know. It's written on your suit."

"Oh yeah. Right."

For an uncomfortably long moment, neither spoke. At last Izmailova cleared her throat and briskly said, "This is ridiculous. There's no reason we should—"

CLANG.

Their heads jerked toward the door in unison. The sound was harsh, loud, metallic. Gunther slammed his helmet on, grabbed for his gloves. Izmailova, also suiting up as rapidly as she could, tensely subvocalized into her trance chip: "What is it?"

Methodically snapping his wrist latches shut one by one, Gunther said, "I think it's a metal punch." Then, because the helmet muffled his words, he repeated them over the chip.

CLANG. This second time, they were waiting for the sound. Now there could be no doubt. Something was trying to break open the outer airlock door.

"A what?!"

"Might be a hammer of some type, or a blacksmith unit. Just be thankful it's not a laser jig." He held up his hands before him. "Give me a safety check."

She turned his wrists one way, back, took his helmet in her hands and gave it a twist to test its seal. "You pass." She held up her own wrists. "But what is it trying to do?"

Her gloves were sealed perfectly. One helmet dog had a bit of give in it, but not enough to breach integrity. He shrugged. "It's deranged—it could want anything. It might even be trying to repair a weak hinge."

CLANG.

"It's trying to get in here!"

"That's another possibility, yes."

Izmailova's voice rose slightly. "But even scrambled, there can't possibly be any programs in its memory to make it do that. How can random input make it act this way?"

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"It doesn't work like that. You're thinking of the kind of robotics they had when you were a kid. These units are state of the art: They don't manipulate instructions, they manipulate concepts. See, that makes them more flexible. You don't have to program in every little step when you want one to do something new. You just give it a goal—"

CLANG.

"—like, to Disassemble a Rotary Drill. It's got a bank of available skills, like Cutting and Unbolting and Gross Manipulation, which it then fits together in various configurations until it has a path that will bring it to the goal." He was talking for the sake of talking now, talking to keep himself from panic. "Which normally works out fine. But when one of these things malfunctions, it does so on the conceptual level. See? So that—"

"So that it decides we're rotary drills that need to be disassembled."

"Uh . . . yeah."

CLANG.

"So what do we do when it gets in here?" They had both involuntarily risen to their feet, and stood facing the door. There was not much space, and what little there was they filled. Gunther was acutely aware that there was not enough room here to either fight or flee.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I'm going to hit that sucker over the head with the toilet."

She turned to look at him.

CLA—The noise was cut in half by a breathy, whooshing explosion. Abrupt, total silence. "It's through the outer door," Gunther said flatly.

They waited.

Much later, Izmailova said, "Is it possible it's gone away?"

"I don't know." Gunther undogged his helmet, knelt and put an ear to the floor. The stone was almost painfully cold. "Maybe the explosion damaged it." He could hear the faint vibrations of the assemblers, the heavier rumblings of machines roving the factory floor. None of it sounded close. He silently counted to a hundred. Nothing. He counted to a hundred again.

Finally he straightened. "It's gone."

They both sat down. Izmailova took off her helmet, and Gunther clumsily began undoing his gloves. He fumbled at the latches. "Look at me." He laughed shakily. "I'm all thumbs. I can't even handle this, I'm so unnerved."

"Let me help you with that." Izmailova flipped up the latches, tugged at his glove. It came free. "Where's your other hand?"

Then, somehow, they were each removing the other's suit, tugging at the latches, undoing the seals. They began slowly but sped up with each latch undogged, until they were yanking and pulling with frantic haste. Gunther opened up the front of Izmailova's suit, revealing a red silk camisole. He slid his hands beneath it, and pushed the cloth up over her breasts. Her nipples were hard. He let her breasts fill his hands and squeezed.

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Izmailova made a low, groaning sound in the back of her throat. She had Gunther's suit open. Now she pushed down his leggings and reached within to seize his cock. He was already erect. She tugged it out and impatiently shoved him down on the cot. Then she was kneeling on top of him and guiding him inside her.

Her mouth met his, warm and moist.

Half in and half out of their suits, they made love. Gunther managed to struggle one arm free, and reached within Izmailova's suit to run a hand up her long back and over the back of her head. The short hairs of her buzz cut stung and tickled his palm.

She rode him roughly, her flesh slippery with sweat against his. "Are you coming yet?" she murmured. "Are you coming yet? Tell me when you're about to come." She bit his shoulder, the side of his neck, his chin, his lower lip. Her nails dug into his flesh.

"Now," he whispered. Possibly he only subvocalized it, and she caught it on her trance chip. But then she clutched him tighter than ever, as if she were trying to crack his ribs, and her whole body shuddered with orgasm. Then he came too, riding her passion down into spiraling desperation, ecstasy and release.

It was better than anything he had ever experienced before.

Afterward, they finally kicked free of their suits. They shoved and pushed the things off the cot. Gunther pulled the blanket out from beneath them, and with Izmailova's help wrapped it about the both of them. They lay together, relaxed, not speaking.

He listened to her breathe for a while. The noise was soft. When she turned her face toward him, he could feel it, a warm little tickle in the hollow of his throat. The smell of her permeated the room. This stranger beside him.

Gunther felt weary, warm, at ease. "How long have you been here?" he asked. "Not here in the shelter, I mean, but . . ."

"Five days."

"That little." He smiled. "Welcome to the Moon, Ms. Izmailova."

"Ekatarina," she said sleepily. "Call me Ekatarina."

Whooping, they soared high and south, over Herschel. The Ptolemaeus road bent and doubled below them, winding out of sight, always returning. "This is great!" Hiro crowed. "This is—I should've talked you into taking me out here a year ago."

Gunther checked his bearings and throttled down, sinking eastward. The other two hoppers, slaved to his own, followed in tight formation. Two days had passed since the flare storm and Gunther, still on mandatory recoop, had promised to guide his friends into the highlands as soon as the surface advisory was dropped. "We're coming in now. Better triplecheck your safety harnesses. You doing okay back there, Kreesh?"

"I am quite comfortable, yes."

Then they were down on the Seething Bay Company landing pad.

Hiro was the second down and the first on the surface. He bounded

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about like a collie off its leash, chasing upslope and down, looking for new vantage points. "I can't believe I'm here! I work out this way every day, but you know what? This is the first time I've actually been out here. Physically, I mean."

"Watch your footing," Gunther warned. "This isn't like telepresence—if you break a leg, it'll be up to Krishna and me to carry you out."

"I trust you. Man, anybody who can get caught out in a flare storm, and end up nailing—"

"Hey, watch your language, okay?"

"Everybody's heard the story. I mean, we all thought you were dead, and then they found the two of you *asleep*. They'll be talking about it a hundred years from now." Hiro was practically choking on his laughter. "You're a legend!"

"Just give it a rest." To change the subject, Gunther said, "I can't believe you want to take a photo of this mess." The Seething Bay operation was a strip mine. Robot bulldozers scooped up the regolith and fed it to a processing plant that rested on enormous skids. They were after the thorium here, and the output was small enough that it could be transported to the breeder reactor by hopper. There was no need for a railgun and the tailings were piled in artificial mountains in the wake of the factory.

"Don't be ridiculous." Hiro swept an arm southward, toward Ptolemaeus. "There!" The crater wall caught the sun, while the lowest parts of the surrounding land were still in shadow. The gentle slopes seemed to tower; the crater itself was a cathedral, blazing white.

"Where is your camera?" Krishna asked.

"Don't need one. I'll just take the data down on my helmet."

"I'm not too clear on this mosaic project of yours," Gunther said. "Explain to me one more time how it's supposed to work."

"Anya came up with it. She's renting an assembler to cut hexagonal floor tiles in black, white, and fourteen intermediate shades of grey. I provide the pictures. We choose the one we like best, scan it in black and white, screen for values of intensity, and then have the assembler lay the floor, one tile per pixel. It'll look great—come by tomorrow and see."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Chattering like a squirrel, Hiro led them away from the edge of the mine. They bounded westward, across the slope.

Krishna's voice came over Gunther's trance chip. It was an old groundrat trick. The chips had an effective transmission radius of fifteen yards—you could turn off the radio and talk chip-to-chip, if you were close enough. "You sound troubled, my friend."

He listened for a second carrier tone, heard nothing. Hiro was out of range. "It's Izmailova. I sort of—"

"Fell in love with her."

"How'd you know that?"

They were spaced out across the rising slope, Hiro in the lead. For a time neither spoke. There was a calm, confidential quality to that shared

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silence, like the anonymous stillness of the confessional. "Please don't take this wrong," Krishna said.

"Take what wrong?"

"Gunther, if you take two sexually compatible people, place them in close proximity, isolate them and scare the hell out of them, they will fall in love. That's a given. It's a survival mechanism, something that was wired into your basic makeup long before you were born. When billions of years of evolution say it's bonding time, your brain doesn't have much choice but to obey."

"Hey, come on over here!" Hiro cried over the radio. "You've got to see this."

"We're coming," Gunther said. Then, over his chip, "You make me out to be one of Sally Chang's machines."

"In some ways we *are* machines. That's not so bad. We feel thirsty when we need water, adrenaline pumps into the bloodstream when we need an extra boost of aggressive energy. You can't fight your own nature. What would be the point of it?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"Is this great or what?" Hiro was clambering over a boulder field. "It just goes on and on. And look up there!" Upslope, they saw that what they were climbing over was the spillage from a narrow cleft entirely filled with boulders. They were huge, as big as hoppers, some of them large as prefab oxysheds. "Hey, Krishna, I been meaning to ask you—just what is it that you do out there at the Center?"

"I can't talk about it."

"Aw, come on." Hiro lifted a rock the size of his head to his shoulder and shoved it away, like a shot-putter. The rock soared slowly, landed far downslope in a white explosion of dust. "You're among friends here. You can trust us."

Krishna shook his head. Sunlight flashed from the visor. "You don't know what you're asking."

Hiro hoisted a second rock, bigger than the first. Gunther knew him in this mood, nasty-faced and grinning. "My point exactly. The two of us know zip about neurobiology. You could spent the next ten hours lecturing us, and we couldn't catch enough to compromise security." Another burst of dust.

"You don't understand. The Center for Self-Replicating Technologies is here for a reason. The lab work could be done back on Earth for a fraction of what a lunar facility costs. Our sponsors only move projects here that they're genuinely afraid of."

"So what *can* you tell us about? Just the open stuff, the video magazine stuff. Nothing secret."

"Well . . . okay." Now it was Krishna's turn. He picked up a small rock, wound up like a baseball player and threw. It dwindled and disappeared in the distance. A puff of white sprouted from the surface. "You know Sally Chang? She has just finished mapping the neurotransmitter functions."

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They waited. When Krishna added nothing further, Hiro dryly said, "Wow."

"Details, Kreesh. Some of us aren't so fast to see the universe in a grain of sand as you are."

"It should be obvious. We've had a complete genetic map of the brain for almost a decade. Now add to that Sally Chang's chemical map, and it's analogous to being given the keys to the library. No, better than that. Imagine that you've spent your entire life within an enormous library filled with books in a language you neither read nor speak, and that you've just found the dictionary and a picture reader."

"So what are you saying? That we'll have complete understanding of how the brain operates?"

"We'll have complete *control* over how the brain operates. With chemical therapy, it will be possible to make anyone think or feel anything we want. We will have an immediate cure for all nontraumatic mental illness. We'll be able to fine-tune aggression, passion, creativity—bring them up, damp them down, it'll be all the same. You can see why our sponsors are so afraid of what our research might produce."

"Not really, no. The world could use more sanity," Gunther said.

"I agree. But who defines sanity? Many governments consider political dissent grounds for mental incarceration. This would open the doors of the brain, allowing it to be examined from the outside. For the first time, it would be possible to discover unexpressed rebellion. Modes of thought could be outlawed. The potential for abuse is not inconsiderable.

"Consider also the military applications. This knowledge combined with some of the new nanoweaponry might produce a berserker gas, allowing you to turn the enemy's armies upon their own populace. Or, easier, to throw them into a psychotic frenzy and let them turn on themselves. Cities could be pacified by rendering the citizenry catatonic. A secondary, internal reality could then be created, allowing the conqueror to use the masses as slave labor. The possibilities are endless."

They digested this in silence. At last Hiro said, "Jeez, Krishna, if that's the open goods, what the hell kind of stuff do you have to hide?"

"I can't tell you."

A minute later, Hiro was haring off again. At the foot of a nearby hill he found an immense boulder standing atilt on its small end. He danced about, trying to get good shots past it without catching his own footprints in them.

"So what's the problem?" Krishna said over his chip.

"The problem is, I can't arrange to see her. Ekatarina. I've left messages, but she won't answer them. And you know how it is in Bootstrap—it takes a real effort to avoid somebody who wants to see you. But she's managed it."

Krishna said nothing.

"All I want to know is, just what's going on here?"

"She's avoiding you."

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"But why? I fell in love and she didn't, is that what you're telling me? I mean, is that a crock or what?"

"Without hearing her side of the story, I can't really say how she feels. But the odds are excellent she fell every bit as hard as you did. The difference is that you think it's a good idea, and she doesn't. So of course she's avoiding you. Contact would just make it more difficult for her to master her feelings for you."

"Shit!"

An unexpected touch of wryness entered Krishna's voice. "What do you want? A minute ago you were complaining that I think you're a machine. Now you're unhappy that Izmailova thinks she's not."

"Hey, you guys! Come over here. I've found the perfect shot. You've got to see this."

They turned to see Hiro waving at them from the hilltop. "I thought you were leaving," Gunther grumbled. "You said you were sick of the Moon, and going away and never coming back. So how come you're upgrading your digs all of a sudden?"

"That was yesterday! Today, I'm a pioneer, a builder of worlds, a founder of dynasties!"

"This is getting tedious. What does it take to get a straight answer out of you?"

Hiro bounded high and struck a pose, arms wide and a little ridiculous. He staggered a bit on landing. "Anya and I are getting married!"

Gunther and Krishna looked at each other, blank visor to blank visor. Forcing enthusiasm into his voice, Gunther said, "Hey, no shit? Really! Congratu—"

A scream of static howled up from nowhere. Gunther winced and cut down the gain. "My stupid radio is—"

One of the other two—they had moved together and he couldn't tell them apart at this distance—was pointing upward. Gunther tilted back his head, to look at the Earth. For a second he wasn't sure what he was looking for. Then he saw it: a diamond pinprick of light in the middle of the night. It was like a small, bright hole in reality, somewhere in continental Asia. "What the hell is *that?*" he asked.

Softly, Hiro said, "I think it's Vladivostok."

By the time they were back over the Sinus Medii, that first light had reddened and faded away, and two more had blossomed. The news jockey at the Observatory was working overtime splicing together reports from the major news feeds into a montage of rumor and fear. The radio was full of talk about hits on Seoul and Buenos Aires. Those seemed certain. Strikes against Panama, Iraq, Denver, and Cairo were disputed. A stealth missile had flown low over Hokkaido and been deflected into the Sea of Japan. The Swiss Orbitals had lost some factories to fragmentation satellites. There was no agreement as to the source aggressor, and though most suspicions trended in one direction, Tokyo denied everything.

Gunther was most impressed by the sound feed from a British video

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essayist, who said that it did not matter who had fired the first shot, or why. "Who shall we blame? The Southern Alliance, Tokyo, General Kim, or possibly some Grey terrorist group that nobody has ever heard of before? In a world whose weapons were wired to hair triggers, the question is irrelevant. When the first device exploded, it activated autonomous programs which launched what is officially labeled 'a measured response.' Gorshov himself could not have prevented it. His tactical programs chose this week's three most likely aggressors—at least two of which were certainly innocent—and launched a response. Human beings had no say over it.

"Those three nations in turn had their own reflexive 'measured responses.' The results of which we are just beginning to learn. Now we will pause for five days, while all concerned parties negotiate. How do we know this? Abstracts of all major defense programs are available on any public data net. They are no secret. Openness is in fact what deterrence is all about.

"We have five days to avert a war that literally nobody wants. The question is, in five days can the military and political powers seize control of their own defense programming? Will they? Given the pain and anger involved, the traditional hatreds, national chauvinism, and the natural reactions of those who number loved ones among the already dead, can those in charge overcome their own natures in time to pull back from final and total war? Our best informed guess is no. No, they cannot.

"Good night, and may God have mercy on us all."

They flew northward in silence. Even when the broadcast cut off in midword, nobody spoke. It was the end of the world, and there was nothing they could say that did not shrink to insignificance before that fact. They simply headed home.

The land about Bootstrap was dotted with graffiti, great block letters traced out in boulders: KARL OPS - EINDHOVEN '49 and LOUISE MCTIGHE ALBUQUERQUE N.M. An enormous eye in a pyramid AR-SENAL WORLD RUGBY CHAMPS with a crown over it. CORNPONE. Pi Lambda Phi. MOTORHEADS. A giant with a club. Coming down over them, Gunther reflected that they all referred to places and things in the world overhead, not a one of them indigenous to the Moon. What had always seemed pointless now struck him as unspeakably sad.

It was only a short walk from the hopper pad to the vacuum garage. They didn't bother to summon a jitney.

The garage seemed strangely unfamiliar to Gunther now, though he had passed through it a thousand times. It seemed to float in its own mystery, as if everything had been removed and replaced by its exact double, rendering it different and somehow unknowable. Row upon row of parked vehicles were slanted by type within the painted lines. Ceiling lights strained to reach the floor, and could not.

"Boy, is this place still!" Hiro's voice seemed unnaturally loud.

It was true. In all the cavernous reaches of the garage, not a single

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remote or robot service unit stirred. Not so much as a pressure leak sniffer moved.

"Must be because of the news," Gunther muttered. He found he was not ready to speak of the war directly. To the back of the garage, five airlocks stood all in a row. Above them a warm, yellow strip of window shone in the rock. In the room beyond, he could see the overseer moving about.

Hiro waved an arm, and the small figure within leaned forward to wave back. They trudged to the nearest lock and waited.

Nothing happened.

After a few minutes, they stepped back and away from the lock to peer up through the window. The overseer was still there, moving unhurriedly. "Hey!" Hiro shouted over open frequency. "You up there! Are you on the job?"

The man smiled, nodded and waved again.

"Then open the goddamned door!" Hiro strode forward, and with a final, nodding wave, the overseer bent over his controls.

"Uh, Hiro," Gunther said, "There's something odd about . . ."

The door exploded open.

It slammed open so hard and fast the door was half torn off its hinges. The air within blasted out like a charge from a cannon. For a moment the garage was filled with loose tools, parts of vacuum suits and shreds of cloth. A wrench struck Gunther a glancing blow on his arm, spinning him around and knocking him to the floor.

He stared up in shock. Bits and pieces of things hung suspended for a long, surreal instant. Then, the air fled, they began to slowly shower down. He got up awkwardly, massaging his arm through the suit. "Hiro, are you all right? Kreesh?"

"Oh my God," Krishna said.

Gunther spun around. He saw Krishna crouched in the shadow of a flatbed, over something that could not possibly be Hiro, because it bent the wrong way. He walked through shimmering unreality and knelt beside Krishna. He stared down at Hiro's corpse.

Hiro had been standing directly before the door when the overseer opened it without depressurizing the corridor within first. He had caught the blast straight on. It had lifted him and smashed him against the side of a flatbed, snapping his spine and shattering his helmet visor with the backlash. He must have died instantaneously.

"Who's there?" a woman said.

A jitney had entered the garage without Gunther's noticing it. He looked up in time to see a second enter, and then a third. People began piling out. Soon there were some twenty individuals advancing across the garage. They broke into two groups. One headed straight toward the locks and the smaller group advanced on Gunther and his friends. It looked for all the world like a military operation. "Who's there?" the woman repeated.

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Gunther lifted his friend's corpse in his arms and stood. "It's Hiro," he said flatly. "Hiro."

They floated forward cautiously, a semicircle of blank-visored suits like so many kachinas. He could make out the corporate logos. Mitsubishi. Westinghouse. Holst Orbital. Izmailova's red-and-orange suit was among them, and a vivid Mondrian pattern he didn't recognize. The woman spoke again, tensely, warily. "Tell me how you're feeling, Hiro."

It was Beth Hamilton.

"That's not Hiro," Krishna said. "It's Gunther. *That's* Hiro. That he's carrying. We were out in the highlands and—" His voice cracked and collapsed in confusion.

"Is that you, Krishna?" someone asked. "There's a touch of luck. Send him up front, we're going to need him when we get in." Somebody else slapped an arm over Krishna's shoulders and led him away.

Over the radio, a clear voice spoke to the overseer. "Dmitri, is that you? It's Signe. You remember me, don't you, Dmitri? Signe Ohmstede. I'm your friend."

"Sure I remember you, Signe. I remember you. How could I ever forget my friend? Sure I do."

"Oh, good. I'm so happy. Listen carefully, Dmitri. Everything's fine."

Indignantly, Gunther chinned his radio to send. "The hell it is! That fool up there—!"

A burly man in a Westinghouse suit grabbed Gunther's bad arm and shook him. "Shut the fuck *up*!" he growled. "This is serious, damn you. We don't have the time to baby you."

Hamilton shoved between them. "For God's sake, Posner, he's just seen—" She stopped. "Let me take care of him. I'll get him calmed down. Just give us half an hour, okay?"

The others traded glances, nodded, and turned away.

To Gunther's surprise, Ekatarina spoke over his trance chip. "I'm sorry, Gunther," she murmured. Then she was gone.

He was still holding Hiro's corpse. He found himself staring down at his friend's ruined face. The flesh was bruised and as puffy-looking as an overboiled hot dog. He couldn't look away.

"Come on." Beth gave him a little shove to get him going. "Put the body in the back of that pick-up and give us a drive out to the cliff."

At Hamilton's insistence, Gunther drove. He found it helped, having something to do. Hands afloat on the steering wheel, he stared ahead looking for the Mausoleum road cut-off. His eyes felt scratchy, and inhumanly dry.

"There was a preemptive strike against us," Hamilton said. "Sabotage. We're just now starting to put the pieces together. Nobody knew you were out on the surface or we would've sent somebody out to meet you. It's all been something of a shambles here."

He drove on in silence, cushioned and protected by all those miles of hard vacuum wrapped about him. He could feel the presence of Hiro's

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corpse in the back of the truck, a constant psychic itch between his shoulder blades. But so long as he didn't speak, he was safe; he could hold himself aloof from the universe that held the pain. It couldn't touch him. He waited, but Beth didn't add anything to what she'd already said.

Finally he said, "Sabotage?"

"A software meltdown at the radio station. Explosions at all the railguns. Three guys from Microspacecraft Applications bought it when the Boitsovij Kot railgun blew. I suppose it was inevitable. All the military industry up here, it's not surprising somebody would want to knock us out of the equation. But that's not all. Something's happened to the people in Bootstrap. Something really horrible. I was out at the Observatory when it happened. The newsjay called back to see if there was any backup software to get the station going again, and she got nothing but gibberish. Crazy stuff. I mean, *really* crazy. We had to disconnect the Observatory's remotes, because the operators were . . ." She was crying now, softly and insistently, and it was a minute before she could speak again. "Some sort of biological weapon. That's all we know."

"We're here."

As he pulled up to the foot of the Mausoleum cliff, it occurred to Gunther that they hadn't thought to bring a drilling rig. Then he counted ten black niches in the rockface, and realized that somebody had been thinking ahead.

"The only people who weren't hit were those who were working at the Center or the Observatory, or out on the surface. Maybe a hundred of us all told."

They walked around to the back of the pick-up. Gunther waited, but Hamilton didn't offer to carry the body. For some reason that made him feel angry and resentful. He unlatched the gate, hopped up on the treads, and hoisted the suited corpse. "Let's get this over with."

Before today, only six people had ever died on the Moon. They walked past the caves in which their bodies awaited eternity. Gunther knew their names by heart: Heisse, Yasuda, Spehalski, Dubinin, Mikami, Castillo. And now Hiro. It seemed incomprehensible that the day should ever come when there would be too many dead to know them all by name.

Daisies and tiger lilies had been scattered before the vaults in such profusion that he couldn't help crushing some underfoot.

They entered the first empty niche, and he laid Hiro down upon a stone table cut into the rock. In the halo of his helmet lamp the body looked piteously twisted and uncomfortable. Gunther found that he was crying, large hot tears that crawled down his face and got into his mouth when he inhaled. He cut off the radio until he had managed to blink the tears away. "Shit." He wiped a hand across his helmet. "I suppose we ought to say something."

Hamilton took his hand and squeezed.

"I've never seen him as happy as he was today. He was going to get married. He was jumping around, laughing and talking about raising a family. And now he's dead, and I don't even know what his religion was."

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A thought occurred to him, and he turned helplessly toward Hamilton. "What are we going to tell Anya?"

"She's got problems of her own. Come on, say a prayer and let's go. You'll run out of oxygen."

"Yeah, okay." He bowed his head. "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . .*"

Back at Bootstrap, the surface party had seized the airlocks and led the overseer away from the controls. The man from Westinghouse, Posner, looked down on them from the observation window. "Don't crack your suits," he warned. "Keep them sealed tight at all times. Whatever hit the bastards here is still around. Might be in the water, might be in the air. One whiff and you're out of here! You got that?"

"Yeah, yeah," Gunther grumbled. "Keep your shirt on."

Posner's hand froze on the controls. "Let's get serious here. I'm not letting you in until you acknowledge the gravity of the situation. This isn't a picnic outing. If you're not prepared to help, we don't need you. Is that understood?"

"We understand completely, and we'll cooperate to the fullest," Hamilton said quickly. "*Won't we,* Weil?"

He nodded miserably.

Only the one lock had been breached, and there were five more sets of pressurized doors between it and the bulk of Bootstrap's air. The city's designers had been cautious.

Overseen by Posner, they passed through the corridors, locks and changing rooms and up the cargo escalators. Finally they emerged into the city interior.

They stood blinking on the lip of Hell.

At first, it was impossible to pinpoint any source for the pervasive sense of wrongness gnawing at the edge of consciousness. The parks were dotted with people, the fill lights at the juncture of crater walls and canopy were bright, and the waterfalls still fell gracefully from terrace to terrace. Button quail bobbed comically in the grass.

Then small details intruded. A man staggered about the fourth level, head jerking, arms waving stiffly. A plump woman waddled by, pulling an empty cart made from a wheeled microfactory stand, quacking like a duck. Someone sat in the kneehigh forest by Noguchi park, tearing out the trees one by one.

But it was the still figures that were on examination more profoundly disturbing. Here a man lay half in and half out of a tunnel entrance, as unselfconscious as a dog. There, three women stood in extreme postures of lassitude, bordering on despair. Everywhere, people did not touch or speak or show in any way that they were aware of one other. They shared an absolute and universal isolation.

"What shall—" Something slammed onto Gunther's back. He was knocked forward, off his feet. Tumbling, he became aware that fists were

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striking him, again and again, and then that a lean man was kneeling atop his chest, hysterically shouting, "Don't do it! Don't do it!"

Hamilton seized the man's shoulders and pulled him away. Gunther got to his knees. He looked into the face of madness: eyes round and fearful, expression full of panic. The man was terrified of Gunther.

With an abrupt wrench, the man broke free. He ran as if pursued by demons. Hamilton stared after him. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure." Gunther adjusted his tool harness. "Let's see if we can find the others."

They walked toward the lake, staring about at the self-absorbed figures scattered about the grass. Nobody attempted to speak to them. A woman ran by, barefooted. Her arms were filled with flowers. "Hey!" Hamilton called after her. She smiled fleetingly over her shoulder, but did not slow. Gunther knew her vaguely, an executive supervisor for Martin Marietta.

"Is *every*body here crazy?" he asked.

"Sure looks that way."

The woman had reached the shore and was flinging the blossoms into the water with great sweeps of her arm. They littered the surface.

"Damned waste." Gunther had come to Bootstrap before the flowers; he knew the effort involved getting permission to plant them and rewriting the city's ecologics. A man in a blue-striped Krupp suit was running along the verge of the lake.

The woman, flowers gone, threw herself into the water.

At first it appeared she'd suddenly decided to take a dip. But from the struggling, floundering way she thrashed deeper into the water it was clear that she could not swim.

In the time it took Gunther to realize this, Hamilton had leaped forward, running for the lake. Belatedly, he started after her. But the man in the Krupp suit was ahead of them both. He splashed in after the woman. An outstretched hand seized her shoulder and then he fell, pulling her under. She was red-faced and choking when he emerged again, arm across her chest.

By then Gunther and Beth were wading into the lake, and together they three got the woman to shore. When she was released, the woman calmly turned and walked away, as if nothing had happened.

"Gone for more flowers," the Krupp component explained. "This is the third time fair Ophelia there's tried to drown herself. She's not the only one. I've been hanging around, hauling 'em out when they stumble in."

"Do you know where everybody else is? Is there anyone in charge? Somebody giving out orders?"

"Do you need any help?" Gunther asked.

The Krupp man shrugged. "I'm fine. No idea where the others are, though. My friends were going on to the second level when I decided I ought to stay here. If you see them, you might tell 'em I'd appreciate hearing back from them. Three guys in Krupp suits."

"We'll do that," Gunther said.

Hamilton was already walking away.

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On a step just beneath the top of the stairs sprawled one of Gunther's fellow G5 components. "Sidney," he said carefully. "How's it going?"

Sidney giggled. "I'm making the effort, if that's what you mean. I don't see that the 'how' of it makes much difference."

"Okay."

"A better way of phrasing that might be to ask why I'm not at work." He stood, and in a very natural manner accompanied Gunther up the steps. "Obviously I can't be two places at once. You wouldn't want to perform major surgery in your own absence, would you?" He giggled again. "It's an oxymoron. Like horses: Those classically beautiful Praxitelesian bodies excreting these long surreal turds."

"Okay."

"I've always admired them for squeezing so much art into a single image."

"Sidney," Hamilton said. "We're looking for our friends. Three people in blue-striped work suits."

"I've seen them. I know just where they went." His eyes were cool and vacant; they didn't seem to focus on anything in particular.

"Can you lead us to them?"

"Even a flower recognizes its own face." A gracefully winding gravel path led through private garden plots and croquet malls. They followed him down it.

There were not many people on the second terrace; with the fall of madness, most seemed to have retreated into the caves. Those few who remained either ignored or cringed away from them. Gunther found himself staring obsessively into their faces, trying to analyze the deficiency he felt in each. Fear nested in their eyes, and the appalled awareness that some terrible thing had happened to them coupled with a complete ignorance of its nature.

"God, these people!"

Hamilton grunted.

He felt he was walking through a dream. Sounds were muted by his suit, and colors less intense seen through his helmet visor. It was as if he had been subtly removed from the world, there and not-there simultaneously, an impression that strengthened with each new face that looked straight through him with mad, unseeing indifference.

Sidney turned a corner, broke into a trot and jogged into a tunnel entrance. Gunther ran after him. At the mouth of the tunnel, he paused to let his helmet adjust to the new light levels. When it cleared he saw Sidney dart down a side passage. He followed.

At the intersection of passages, he looked and saw no trace of their guide. Sidney had disappeared. "Did you see which way he went?" he asked Hamilton over the radio. There was no answer. "Beth?"

He started down the corridor, halted, and turned back. These things went deep. He could wander around in them forever. He went back out to the terraces. Hamilton was nowhere to be seen.

For lack of any better plan, he followed the path. Just beyond an

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ornamental holly bush he was pulled up short by a vision straight out of William Blake.

The man had discarded shirt and sandals, and wore only a pair of shorts. He squatted atop a boulder, alert, patient, eating a tomato. A steel pipe slanted across his knees like a staff or scepter, and he had woven a crown of sorts from platinum wire with a fortune's worth of hyperconductor chips dangling over his forehead. He looked every inch a kingly animal.

He stared at Gunther, calm and unblinking.

Gunther shivered. The man seemed less human than anthropoid, crafty in its way, but unthinking. He felt as if he were staring across the eons at Grandfather Ape, crouched on the edge of awareness. An involuntary thrill of superstitious awe seized him. Was this what happened when the higher mental functions were scraped away? Did Archetype lie just beneath the skin, waiting for the opportunity to emerge?

"I'm looking for my friend," he said. "A woman in a G5 suit like mine? Have you seen her? She was looking for three—" He stopped. The man was staring at him blankly. "Oh, never mind."

He turned away and walked on.

After a time, he lost all sense of continuity. Existence fragmented into unconnected images: A man bent almost double, leering and squeezing a yellow rubber duckie. A woman leaping up like a jack-in-the-box from behind an air monitor, shrieking and flapping her arms. An old friend sprawled on the ground, crying, with a broken leg. When he tried to help her, she scrabbled away from him in fear. He couldn't get near her without doing more harm. "Stay here," he said, "I'll find help." Five minutes later he realized that he was lost, with not the slightest notion of how to find his way back to her again. He came to the stairs leading back down to the bottom level. There was no reason to go down them. There was no reason not to. He went down.

He had just reached the bottom of the stairs when someone in a lavender boutique suit hurried by.

Gunther chinned on his helmet radio.

"Hello!" The lavender suit glanced back at him, its visor a plate of obsidian, but did not turn back. "Do you know where everyone's gone? I'm totally lost. How can I find out what I should be doing?" The lavender suit ducked into a tunnel.

Faintly, a voice answered, "Try the city manager's office."

The city manager's office was a tight little cubby an eighth of a kilometer deep within the tangled maze of administrative and service tunnels. It had never been very important in the scheme of things. The city manager's prime duties were keeping the air and water replenished and scheduling airlock inspections, functions any computer could handle better than a man had they dared trust them to a machine. The room had probably never been as crowded as it was now. Dozens of people suited for full vacuum spilled out into the hall, anxiously listening to Ekatarina

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confer with the city's Crisis Management Program. Gunther pushed in as close as he could; even so, he could barely see her.

"—the locks, the farms and utilities, and we've locked away all the remotes. What comes next?"

Ekatarina's peecee hung from her work harness, amplifying the CMP's silent voice. "Now that elementary control has been established, second priority must go to the industrial sector. The factories must be locked down. The reactors must be put to sleep. There is not sufficient human supervisory presence to keep them running. The factories have mothballing programs available upon request.

"Third, the farms cannot tolerate neglect. Fifteen minutes without oxygen, and all the tilapia will die. The calimari are even more delicate. Three experienced agricultural components must be assigned immediately. Double that number, if you only have inexperienced components. Advisory software is available. What are your resources?"

"Let me get back to you on that. What else?"

"What about the people?" a man asked belligerantly. "What the hell are you worrying about factories for, when our people are in the state they're in?"

Izmailova looked up sharply. "You're one of Chang's research components, aren't you? Why are you here? Isn't there enough for you to do?" She looked about, as if abruptly awakened from sleep. "All of you! What are you waiting for?"

"You can't put us off that easily! Who made you the little brassplated general? We don't have to take orders from you."

The bystanders shuffled uncomfortably, not leaving, waiting to take their cue from each other. Their suits were as good as identical in this crush, their helmets blank and expressionless. They looked like so many ambulatory eggs.

The crowd's mood balanced on the instant, ready to fall into acceptance or anger with a featherweight's push. Gunther raised an arm. "General!" he said loudly. "Private Weil here! I'm awaiting my orders. Tell me what to do."

Laughter rippled through the room, and the tension eased. Ekatarina said, "Take whoever's nearest you, and start clearing the afflicted out of the administrative areas. Guide them out toward the open, where they won't be so likely to hurt themselves. Whenever you get a room or corridor emptied, lock it up tight. Got that?"

"Yes, ma'am." He tapped the suit nearest him, and its helmet dipped in a curt nod. But when they turned to leave, their way was blocked by the crush of bodies.

"You!" Ekatarina jabbed a finger. "Go to the farmlocks and foam them shut; I don't want any chance of getting them contaminated. Anyone with experience running factories—that's most of us, I think—should find a remote and get to work shutting the things down. The CMP will help direct you. If you have nothing else to do, buddy up and work at clearing out the corridors. I'll call a general meeting when we've put

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together a more comprehensive plan of action." She paused. "What have I left out?"

Surprisingly, the CMP answered her: "There are twenty-three children in the city, two of them seven-year-old prelegals and the rest five years of age or younger, offspring of registered-permanent lunar components. Standing directives are that children be given special care and protection. The third-level chapel can be converted to a care center. Word should be spread that as they are found, the children are to be brought there. Assign one reliable individual to oversee them."

"My God, yes." She turned to the belligerent man from the Center, and snapped, "Do it."

He hesitated, then saluted ironically and turned to go.

That broke the logjam. The crowd began to disperse. Gunther and his co-worker—it turned out to be Liza Nagenda, another ground-rat like himself—set to work.

In after years Gunther was to remember this period as a time when his life entered a dark tunnel. For long, nightmarish hours he and Liza shuffled from office to storage room, struggling to move the afflicted out of the corporate areas and into the light.

The afflicted did not cooperate.

The first few rooms they entered were empty. In the fourth, a distraught-looking woman was furiously going through drawers and files and flinging their contents away. Trash covered the floor. "It's in here somewhere," she said frantically.

"What's in there, darling?" Gunther said soothingly. He had to speak loudly so he could be heard through his helmet. "What are you looking for?"

She tilted her head up with a smile of impish delight. Using both hands, she smoothed back her hair, elbows high, pushing it straight over her skull, then tucking in stray strands behind her ears. "It doesn't matter, because I'm sure to find it now. Two scarabs appear, and between them the blazing disk of the sun, that's a good omen, not to mention being an analogy for sex. I've had sex, all the sex anyone could want, buggered behind the outhouse by the lizard king when I was nine. What did I care? I had wings then and thought that I could fly."

Gunther edged a little closer. "You're not making any sense at all."

"You know, Tolstoy said there was a green stick in the woods behind his house that once found would cause all men to love one another. I believe in that green stick as a basic principle of physical existence. The universe exists in a matrix of four dimensions which we can perceive and seven which we cannot, which is why we experience peace and brotherhood as a seven-dimensional greenstick phenomenon."

"You've got to listen to me."

"Why? You gonna tell me Hitler is dead? I don't believe in that kind of crap."

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"Oh hell," Nagenda said. "You can't reason with a flick. Just grab her arms and we'll chuck her out."

It wasn't that easy, though. The woman was afraid of them. Whenever they approached her, she slipped fearfully away. If they moved slowly, they could not corner her, and when they both rushed her, she leapt up over a desk and then down into the kneehole. Nagenda grabbed her legs and pulled. The woman wailed, and clutched at the knees of Nagenda's suit. "Get offa me," Liza snarled. "Gunther, get this crazy woman off my damn legs."

"Don't kill me!" the woman screamed. "I've always voted twice—you know I did. I told them you were a gangster, but I was wrong. Don't take the oxygen out of my lungs!"

They got the woman out of the office, then lost her again when Gunther turned to lock the door. She went fluttering down the corridor with Nagenda in hot pursuit. Then she dove into another office, and they had to start all over again.

It took over an hour to drive the woman from the corridors and release her into the park. The next three went quickly enough by contrast. The one after that was difficult again, and the fifth turned out to be the first woman they had encountered, wandered back to look for her office. When they'd brought her to the open again, Liza Nagenda said, "That's four flicks down and three thousand, eight hundred fifty-eight to go."

"Look—" Gunther began. And then Krishna's voice sounded over his trance chip, stiffly and with exaggerated clarity. "Everyone is to go to the central lake immediately for an organizational meeting. Repeat: Go to the lake immediately. Go to the lake now." He was obviously speaking over a jury-rigged transmitter. The sound was bad and his voice boomed and popped on the chip.

"All right, okay, I got that," Liza said. "You can shut up now."

"Please go to the lake immediately. Everyone is to go directly to the central—"

"Sheesh."

By the time they got out to the parklands again, the open areas were thick with people. Not just the suited figures of the survivors, either. All the afflicted were emerging from the caves and corridors of Bootstrap. They walked blindly, uncertainly, toward the lake, as if newly called from the grave. The ground level was filling with people.

"Sonofabitch," Gunther said wonderingly.

"Gunther?" Nagenda asked. "What's going on?"

"It's the trance chips! Sonofabitch, all we had to do was speak to them over the chips. They'll do whatever the voice in their heads tells them to do."

The land about the lake was so crowded that Gunther had trouble spotting any other suits. Then he saw a suited figure standing on the edge of the second level waving broadly. He waved back and headed for the stairs.

By the time he got to level two, a solid group of the unafflicted had

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gathered. More and more came up, drawn by the concentration of suits. Finally Ekatarina spoke over the open channel of her suit radio.

"There's no reason to wait for us all to gather. I think everyone is close enough to hear me. Sit down, take a little rest, you've all earned it." People eased down on the grass. Some sprawled on their backs or stomachs, fully suited. Most just sat.

"By a fortunate accident, we've discovered a means of controlling our afflicted friends." There was light applause. "But there are still many problems before us, and they won't all be solved so easily. We've all seen the obvious. Now I must tell you of worse. If the war on Earth goes full thermonuclear, we will be completely and totally cut off, possibly for decades."

A murmur passed through the crowd.

"What does this mean? Beyond the immediate inconveniences—no luxuries, no more silk shirts, no new seed stock, no new videos, no way home for those of us who hadn't already decided to stay—we will be losing much that we require for survival. All our microfacturing capability comes from the Swiss Orbitals. Our water reserves are sufficient for a year, but we lose minute quanitities of water vapor to rust and corrosion and to the vacuum every time somebody goes in or out an airlock, and those quantities are necessary for our existence.

"But we can survive. We can process raw hydrogen and oxygen from the regolith, and burn them to produce water. We already make our own air. We can do without most nanoelectronics. We can thrive and prosper and grow, even if Earth . . . even if the worst happens. But to do so we'll need our full manufacturing capability, and full supervisory capability as well. We must not only restore our factories, but find a way to restore our people. There'll be work and more for all of us in the days ahead."

Nagenda touched helmets with Gunther and muttered, "What a crock."

"Come on, I want to hear this."

"Fortunately, the Crisis Management Program has contingency plans for exactly this situation. According to its records, which may be incomplete, I have more military command experience than any other functional. Does anyone wish to challenge this?" She waited, but nobody said anything. "We will go to a quasimilitary structure for the duration of the emergency. This is strictly for organizational purposes. There will be no privileges afforded the officers, and the military structure will be dismantled *immediately* upon resolution of our present problems. That's paramount."

She glanced down at her peecee. "To that purpose, I am establishing beneath me a triumvirate of subordinate officers, consisting of Carlos Diaz-Rodrigues, Miiko Ezumi, and Will Posner. Beneath them will be nine officers, each responsible for a cadre of no more than ten individuals."

She read out names. Gunther was assigned to Cadre Four, Beth Hamilton's group. Then Ekatarina said, "We're all tired. The gang back at the Center have rigged up a decontamination procedure, a kitchen and

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sleeping spaces of sorts. Cadres One, Two, and Three will put in four more hours here, then pull down a full eight hours sleep. Cadres Four through Nine may return now to the Center for a meal and four hours rest." She stopped. "That's it. Go get some shut-eye."

A ragged cheer arose, fell flat, and died. Gunther stood. Liza Nagenda gave him a friendly squeeze on the butt and when he started to the right yanked his arm and pointed him left, toward the service escalators. With easy familiarity, she slid an arm around his waist.

He'd known guys who'd slept with Liza Nagenda, and they all agreed that she was bad news, possessive, hysterical, ludicrously emotional. But what the hell. It was easier than not.

They trudged off.

There was too much to do. They worked to exhaustion—it was not enough. They rigged a system of narrow-band radio transmissions for the CMP and ran a microwave patch back to the Center, so it could direct their efforts more efficiently—it was not enough. They organized and rearranged constantly. But the load was too great and accidents inevitably happened.

Half the surviving railguns—small units used to deliver raw and semi-processed materials over the highlands and across the bay—were badly damaged when the noonday sun buckled their aluminum rails; the sunscreens had not been put in place in time. An unknown number of robot bulldozers had wandered off from the strip mines and were presumably lost. It was hard to guess how many because the inventory records were scrambled. None of the food stored in Bootstrap could be trusted; the Center's meals had to be harvested direct from the farms and taken out through the emergency locks. An inexperienced farmer mishandled her remote, and ten aquaculture tanks boiled out into vacuum geysering nine thousand fingerlings across the surface. On Posner's orders, the remote handler rigs were hastily packed and moved to the Center. When uncrated, most were found to have damaged rocker arms.

There were small victories. On his second shift, Gunther found fourteen bales of cotton in vacuum storage and set an assembler to sewing futons for the Center. That meant an end to sleeping on bare floors and made him a local hero for the rest of that day. There were not enough toilets in the Center; Diaz-Rodrigues ordered the flare storm shelters in the factories stripped of theirs. Huriel Garza discovered a talent for cooking with limited resources.

But they were losing ground. The afflicted were unpredictable, and they were everywhere. A demented systems analyst, obeying the voices in his head, dumped several barrels of lubricating oil in the lake. The water filters clogged, and the streams had to be shut down for repairs. A doctor somehow managed to strangle herself with her own diagnostic harness. The city's ecologics were badly stressed by random vandalism.

Finally somebody thought to rig up a voice loop for continuous transmission. "I am calm," it said. "I am tranquil. I do not want to do anything. I am happy where I am."

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Gunther was working with Liza Nagenda trying to get the streams going again when the loop came on. He looked up and saw an uncanny quiet spread over Bootstrap. Up and down the terraces, the flicks stood in postures of complete and utter impassivity. The only movement came from the small number of suits scurrying like beetles among the newly catatonic.

Liza put her hands on her hips. "Terrific. Now we've got to *feed* them."

"Hey, cut me some slack, okay? This is the first good news I've heard since I don't know when."

"It's not good anything, sweetbuns. It's just more of the same."

She was right. Relieved as he was, Gunther knew it. One hopeless task has been traded for another.

He was wearily suiting up for his third day when Hamilton stopped him and said, "Weil! You know any electrical engineering?"

"Not really, no. I mean, I can do the wiring for a truck, or maybe rig up a microwave relay, stuff like that, but . . ."

"It'll have to do. Drop what you're on, and help Krishna set up a system for controlling the flicks. Some way we can handle them individually."

They set up shop in Krishna's old lab. The remnants of old security standards still lingered, and nobody had been allowed to sleep there. Consequently, the room was wonderfully neat and clean, all crafted-in-orbit laboratory equipment with smooth, anonymous surfaces. It was a throwback to a time before clutter and madness had taken over. If it weren't for the new-tunnel smell, the raw tang of cut rock the air carried, it would be possible to pretend nothing had happened.

Gunther stood in a telepresence rig, directing a remote through Bootstrap's apartments. They were like so many unconnected cells of chaos. He entered one and found the words BUDDHA = COSMIC INERTIA scrawled on its wall with what looked to be human feces. A woman sat on the futon tearing handfuls of batting from it and flinging them in the air. Cotton covered the room like a fresh snowfall. The next apartment was empty and clean, and a microfactory sat gleaming on a ledge. "I hereby nationalize you in the name of the People's Provisional Republic of Bootstrap, and of the oppressed masses everywhere," he said dryly. The remote gingerly picked it up. "You done with that chip diagram yet?"

"It will not be long now," Krishna said.

They were building a prototype controller. The idea was to code each peecee, so the CMP could identify and speak to its owner individually. By stepping down the voltage, they could limit the peecee's transmission range to a meter and a half so that each afflicted person could be given individualized orders. The existing chips, however, were high-strung Swiss Orbital thoroughbreds, and couldn't handle oddball power yields. They had to be replaced.

"I don't see how you can expect to get any useful work out of these

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guys, though. I mean, what we need are supervisors. You can't hope to get coherent thought out of them."

Bent low over his peecee, Krishna did not answer at first. Then he said, "Do you know how a yogi stops his heart? We looked into that when I was in grad school. We asked Yogi Premanand if he would stop his heart while wired up to our instruments, and he graciously consented. We had all the latest brain scanners, but it turned out the most interesting results were recorded by the EKG.

"We found that the yogi's heart did not as we had expected slow down, but rather went faster and faster, until it reached its physical limits and began to fibrillate. He had not slowed his heart; he had sped it up. It did not stop, but went into spasm.

"After our tests, I asked him if he had known these facts. He said no, that they were most interesting. He was polite about it, but clearly did not think our findings very significant."

"So you're saying. . . ?"

"The problem with schizophrenics is that they have too much going on in their heads. Too many voices. Too many ideas. They can't focus their attention on a single chain of thought. But it would be a mistake to think them incapable of complex reasoning. In fact, they're thinking brilliantly. Their brains are simply operating at such peak efficiencies that they can't organize their thoughts coherently.

"What the trance chip does is to provide one more voice, but a louder, more insistent one. That's why they obey it. It breaks through that noise, provides a focus, serves as a matrix along which thought can crystallize."

The remote unlocked the door into a conference room deep in the administrative tunnels. Eight microfactories waited in a neat row atop the conference table. It added the ninth, turned, and left, locking the door behind it. "You know," Gunther said, "all these elaborate precautions may be unnecessary. Whatever was used on Bootstrap may not be in the air anymore. It may never have *been* in the air. It could've been in the water or something."

"Oh, it's there all right, in the millions. We're dealing with an airborne schizomimetic engine. It's designed to hang around in the air indefinitely."

"A schizomimetic engine? What the hell is that?"

In a distracted monotone, Krishna said, "A schizomimetic engine is a strategic nonlethal weapon with high psychological impact. It not only incapacitates its target vectors, but places a disproportionately heavy burden on the enemy's manpower and material support caring for the victims. Due to the particular quality of the effect, it has a profoundly demoralizing influence on those exposed to the victims, especially those involved in their care. Thus, it is particularly desirable as a strategic weapon." He might have been quoting from an operations manual.

Gunther pondered that. "Calling the meeting over the chips wasn't a mistake, was it? You knew it would work. You knew they would obey a voice speaking inside their heads."

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"Yes."

"This shit was brewed up at the Center, wasn't it? This is the stuff that you couldn't talk about."

"Some of it."

Gunther powered down his rig and flipped up the lens. "God damn you, Krishna! God damn you straight to Hell, you stupid fucker!"

Krishna looked up from his work, bewildered. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No! No, you haven't said a damned thing wrong—you've just driven four thousand people out of their fucking minds, is all! Wake up and take a good look at what you maniacs have done with your weapons research!"

"It wasn't weapons research," Krishna said mildly. He drew a long, involuted line on the schematic. "But when pure research is funded by the military, the military will seek out military applications for the research. That's just the way it is."

"What's the difference? It happened. You're responsible."

Now Krishna actually set his peecee aside. He spoke with uncharacteristic fire. "Gunther, we *need* this information. Do you realize that we are trying to run a technological civilization with a brain that was evolved in the neolithic? I am perfectly serious. We're all trapped in the old hunter-gatherer programs, and they are of no use to us anymore. Take a look at what's happening on Earth. They're hip-deep in a war that nobody meant to start and nobody wants to fight and it's even money that nobody can stop. The type of thinking that put us in this corner is not to our benefit. It has to change. And that's what we are working toward—taming the human brain. Harnessing it. Reining it in.

"Granted, our research has been turned against us. But what's one more weapon among so many? If neuroprogrammers hadn't been available, something else would have been used. Mustard gas maybe, or plutonium dust. For that matter, they could've just blown a hole in the canopy and let us all strangle."

"That's self-justifying bullshit, Krishna! Nothing can excuse what you've done."

Quietly, but with conviction, Krishna said, "You will never convince me that our research is not the most important work we could possibly be doing today. We must seize control of this monster within our skulls. We must change our ways of thinking." His voice dropped. "The sad thing is that we cannot change unless we survive. But in order to survive, we must first change."

They worked in silence after that.

Gunther awoke from restless dreams to find that the sleep shift was only half over. Liza was snoring. Careful not to wake her, he pulled his clothes on and padded barefoot out of his niche and down the hall. The light was on in the common room and he heard voices.

Ekatarina looked up when he entered. Her face was pale and drawn. Faint circles had formed under her eyes. She was alone.

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"Oh, hi. I was just talking with the CMP." She thought off her peecee. "Have a seat."

He pulled up a chair and hunched down over the table. Confronted by her, he found it took a slight but noticeable effort to draw his breath. "So. How are things going?"

"They'll be trying out your controllers soon. The first batch of chips ought to be coming out of the factories in an hour or so. I thought I'd stay up to see how they work out."

"It's that bad, then?" Ekatarina shook her head, would not look at him. "Hey, come on, here you are waiting up on the results, and I can see how tired you are. There must be a lot riding on this thing."

"More than you know," she said bleakly. "I've just been going over the numbers. Things are worse than you can imagine."

He reached out and took her cold, bloodless hand. She squeezed him so tightly it hurt. Their eyes met and he saw in hers all the fear and wonder he felt.

Wordlessly, they stood.

"I'm niching alone," Ekatarina said. She had not let go of his hand, held it so tightly, in fact, that it seemed she would never let it go.

Gunther let her lead him away.

They made love, and talked quietly about inconsequential things, and made love again. Gunther had thought she would nod off immediately after the first time, but she was too full of nervous energy for that.

"Tell me when you're about to come," she murmured. "Tell me when you're coming."

He stopped moving. "Why do you always say that?"

Ekatarina looked up at him dazedly, and he repeated the question. Then she laughed a deep, throaty laugh. "Because I'm frigid."

"Hah?"

She took his hand, and brushed her cheek against it. Then she ducked her head, continuing the motion across her neck and up the side of her scalp. He felt the short, prickly hair against his palm and then, behind her ear, two bumps under the skin where biochips had been implanted. One of those would be her trance chip and the other . . . "It's a prosthetic," she explained. Her eyes were grey and solemn. "It hooks into the pleasure centers. When I need to, I can turn on my orgasm at a thought. That way we can always come at the same time." She moved her hips slowly beneath him as she spoke.

"But that means you don't really need to have any kind of sexual stimulation at all, do you? You can trigger an orgasm at will. While you're riding on a bus. Or behind a desk. You could just turn that thing on and come for hours at a time."

She looked amused. "I'll tell you a secret. When it was new, I used to do stunts like that. Everybody does. One outgrows that sort of thing quickly."

With more than a touch of stung pride, Gunther said, "Then what am

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I doing here? If you've got that thing, what the hell do you need me for?" He started to draw away from her.

She pulled him down atop her again. "You're kind of comforting," she said. "In an argumentative way. Come here."

He got back to his futon and began gathering up the pieces of his suit. Liza sat up sleepily and gawked at him. "So," she said. "It's like that, is it?"

"Yeah, well. I kind of left something unfinished. An old relationship." Warily, he extended a hand. "No hard feelings, huh?"

Ignoring his hand, she stood, naked and angry. "You got the nerve to stand there without even wiping my smile off your dick first and say no hard feelings? Asshole!"

"Aw, come on now, Liza, it's not like that."

"Like hell it's not! You got a shot at that white-assed Russian ice queen, and I'm history. Don't think I don't know all about her."

"I was hoping we could still be, you know, friends."

"Nice trick, shithead." She balled her fist and hit him hard in the center of his chest. Tears began to form in her eyes. "You just slink away. I'm tired of looking at you."

He left.

But did not sleep. Ekatarina was awake and ebullient over the first reports coming in on the new controller system. "They're working!" she cried. "They're working!" She'd pulled on a silk camisole, and strode back and forth excitedly, naked to the waist. Her pubic hair was a white flame, with almost invisible trails of smaller hairs reaching for her navel and caressing the sweet insides of her thighs. Tired as he was, Gunther felt new desire for her. In a weary, washed-out way, he was happy.

"Whooh!" She kissed him hard, not sexually, and called up the CMP. "Rerun all our earlier projections. We're putting our afflicted components back to work. Adjust all work schedules."

"As you direct."

"How does this change our long-range prospects?"

The program was silent for several seconds, processing. Then it said, "You are about to enter a necessary but very dangerous stage of recovery. You are going from a low-prospects high-stability situation to a high-prospects high-instability one. With leisure your unafflicted components will quickly grow dissatisfied with your government."

"What happens if I just step down?"

"Prospects worsen drastically."

Ekatarina ducked her head. "All right, what's likely to be our most pressing new problem?"

"The unafflicted components will demand to know more about the war on Earth. They'll want the media feeds restored immediately."

"I could rig up a receiver easily enough," Gunther volunteered. "Nothing fancy, but . . ."

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"Don't you dare!"

"Hah? Why not?"

"Gunther, let me put it to you this way: What two nationalities are most heavily represented here?"

"Well, I guess that would be Russia and—oh."

"Oh is right. For the time being, I think it's best if nobody knows for sure who's supposed to be enemies with whom." She asked the CMP, "How should I respond?"

"Until the situation stabilizes, you have no choice but distraction. Keep their minds occupied. Hunt down the saboteurs and then organize war crime trials."

"That's out. No witch hunts, no scapegoats, no trials. We're all in this together."

Emotionlessly, the CMP said, "Violence is the left hand of government. You are rash to dismiss its potentials without serious thought."

"I won't discuss it."

"Very well. If you wish to postpone the use of force for the present, you could hold a hunt for the weapon used on Bootstrap. Locating and identifying it would involve everyone's energies without necessarily implicating anybody. It would also be widely interpreted as meaning an eventual cure was possible, thus boosting the general morale without your actually lying."

Tiredly, as if this were something she had gone over many times already, she said, "Is there really no hope of curing them?"

"Anything is possible. In light of present resources, though, it cannot be considered likely."

Ekatarina thought the peecee off, dismissing the CMP. She sighed. "Maybe that's what we ought to do. Donkey up a hunt for the weapon. We ought to be able to do something with that notion."

Puzzled, Gunther said, "But it was one of Chang's weapons, wasn't it? A schizomimetic engine, right?"

"Where did you hear that?" she demanded sharply.

"Well, Krishna said . . . he didn't act like . . . I thought it was public knowledge."

Ekatarina's face hardened. "Program!" she thought.

The CMP came back to life. "Ready."

"Locate Krishna Narasimhan, unafflicted, Cadre Five. I want to speak with him immediately." Ekatarina snatched up her panties and shorts, and furiously began dressing. "Where are my damned sandals? Program! Tell him to meet me in the common room. Right away."

"Received."

To Gunther's surprise, it took over an hour for Ekatarina to browbeat Krishna into submission. Finally, though, the young research component went to a lockbox, identified himself to it, and unsealed the storage areas. "It's not all that secure," he said apologetically. "If our sponsors knew

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how often we just left everything open so we could get in and out, they'd—well, never mind."

He lifted a flat, palm-sized metal rectangle from a cabinet. "This is the most likely means of delivery. It's an aerosol bomb. The biological agents are loaded *here,* and it's triggered by snapping this back *here.* It's got enough pressure in it to spew the agents fifty feet straight up. Air currents do the rest." He tossed it to Gunther who stared down at the thing in horror. "Don't worry, it's not armed."

He slid out a slim drawer holding row upon gleaming row of slim chrome cylinders. "These contain the engines themselves. They're off-the-shelf nanoweaponry. State of the art stuff, I guess." He ran a fingertip over them. "We've programmed each to produce a different mix of neurotransmitters. Dopamine, phencyclidine, norepinephrine, acetylcholine, met-enkephalin, substance P, serotonin—there's a hefty slice of Heaven in here, and—" he tapped an empty space—"right here is our missing bit of Hell." He frowned, and muttered, "That's curious. Why are there *two* cylinders missing?"

"What's that?" Ekatarina said. "I didn't catch what you just said."

"Oh, nothing important. Um, listen, it might help if I yanked a few biological pathways charts and showed you the chemical underpinnings of these things."

"Never mind that. Just keep it sweet and simple. Tell us about these schizomimetic engines."

It took over an hour to explain.

The engines were molecule-sized chemical factories, much like the assemblers in a microfactory. They had been provided by the military, in the hope Chang's group would come up with a misting weapon that could be sprayed in an army's path to cause them to change their loyalty. Gunther dozed off briefly while Krishna was explaining why that was impossible, and woke up sometime after the tiny engines had made their way into the brain.

"It's really a false schizophrenia," Krishna explained. "True schizophrenia is a beautifully complicated mechanism. What these engines create is more like a bargain-basement knockoff. They seize control of the brain chemistry, and start pumping out dopamine and a few other neuromediators. It's not an actual disorder, per se. They just keep the brain hopping." He coughed. "You see."

"Okay," Ekatarina said. "Okay. You say you can reprogram these things. How?"

"We use what are technically called messenger engines. They're like neuromodulators—they tell the schizomimetic engines what to do." He slid open another drawer, and in a flat voice said, "They're gone."

"Let's keep to the topic, if we may. We'll worry about your inventory later. Tell us about these messenger engines. Can you brew up a lot of them, to tell the schizomimetics to turn themselves off?"

"No, for two reasons. First, these molecules were hand-crafted in the

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Swiss Orbitals; we don't have the industrial plant to create them. Secondly, you can't tell the schizomimetics to turn themselves off. They don't *have* off switches. They're more like catalysts than actual machines. You can reconfigure them to produce different chemicals, but . . ." He stopped, and a distant look came into his eyes. "Damn." He grabbed up his peecee, and a chemical pathways chart appeared on one wall. Then beside it, a listing of major neurofunctions. Then another chart covered with scrawled behavioral symbols. More and more data slammed up on the wall.

"Uh, Krishna. . .?"

"Oh, go away," he snapped. "This is important."

"You think you might be able to come up with a cure?"

"Cure? No. Something better. Much better."

Ekatarina and Gunther looked at each other. Then she said, "Do you need anything? Can I assign anyone to help you?"

"I need the messenger engines. Find them for me."

"How? How do we find them? Where do we look?"

"Sally Chang," Krishna said impatiently. "She must have them. Nobody else had access." He snatched up a light pen, and began scrawling crabbed formulae on the wall.

"I'll get her for you. Program! Tell—"

"Chang's a flick," Gunther reminded her. "She was caught by the aerosol bomb." Which she must surely have set herself. A neat way of disposing of evidence that might've led to whatever government was running her. She'd have been the first to go mad.

Ekatarina pinched her nose, wincing. "I've been awake too long," she said. "All right, I understand. Krishna, from now on you're assigned permanently to research. The CMP will notify your cadre leader. Let me know if you need any support. Find me a way to turn this damned weapon off." Ignoring the way he shrugged her off, she said to Gunther, "I'm yanking you from Cadre Four. From now on, you report directly to me. I want you to find Chang. Find her, and find those messenger engines."

Gunther was bone-weary. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a good eight hours' sleep. But he managed what he hoped was a confident grin. "Received."

A madwoman should not have been able to hide herself. Sally Chang could. Nobody should have been able to evade the CMP's notice, now that it was hooked into a growing number of afflicted individuals. Sally Chang did. The CMP informed Gunther that none of the flicks were aware of Chang's whereabouts. It accepted a directive to have them all glance about for her once every hour until she was found.

In the west tunnels, walls had been torn out to create a space as large as any factory interior. The remotes had been returned, and were now manned by almost two hundred flicks spaced so that they did not impinge upon each other's fields of instruction. Gunther walked by them, through the CMP's whispering voices: "Are all bulldozers accounted for? If

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so . . . Clear away any malfunctioning machines; they can be placed . . . for vacuum-welded dust on the upper surfaces of the rails . . . reduction temperature, then look to see that the oxygen feed is compatible . . ." At the far end a single suit sat in a chair, overseer unit in its lap.

"How's it going?" Gunther asked.

"Absolutely top-notch." He recognized Takayuni's voice. They'd worked in the Flammaprion microwave relay station together. "Most of the factories are up and running, and we're well on our way to having the railguns operative too. You wouldn't believe the kind of efficiencies we're getting here."

"Good, huh?"

Takayuni grinned; Gunther could hear it in his voice. "Industrious little buggers!"

Takayuni hadn't seen Chang. Gunther moved on.

Some hours later he found himself sitting wearily in Noguchi park, looking at the torn-up dirt where the kneehigh forest had been. Not a seedling had been spared; the silver birch was extinct as a lunar species. Dead carp floated belly-up in the oil-slicked central lake; a chain-link fence circled it now, to keep out the flicks. There hadn't been the time yet to begin cleaning up the litter, and when he looked about, he saw trash everywhere. It was sad. It reminded him of Earth.

He knew it was time to get going, but he couldn't. His head sagged, touched his chest, and jerked up. Time had passed.

A flicker of motion made him turn. Somebody in a pastel lavender boutique suit hurried by. The woman who had directed him to the city controller's office the other day. "Hello!" he called. "I found everybody just where you said. Thanks. I was starting to get a little spooked."

The lavender suit turned to look at him. Sunlight glinted on black glass. A still, long minute later, she said, "Don't mention it," and started away.

"I'm looking for Sally Chang. Do you know her? Have you seen her? She's a flick, kind of a little woman, flamboyant, used to favor bright clothes, electric makeup, that sort of thing."

"I'm afraid I can't help you." Lavender was carrying three oxytanks in her arms. "You might try the straw market, though. Lots of bright clothes there." She ducked into a tunnel opening and disappeared within.

Gunther stared after her distractedly, then shook his head. He felt so very, very tired.

The straw market looked as though it had been through a storm. The tents had been torn down, the stands knocked over, the goods looted. Shards of orange and green glass crunched underfoot. Yet a rack of Italian scarves worth a year's salary stood untouched amid the rubble. It made no sense at all.

Up and down the market, flicks were industriously cleaning up. They stooped and lifted and swept. One of them was being beaten by a suit.

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Gunther blinked. He could not react to it as a real event. The woman cringed under the blows, shrieking wildly and scuttling away from them. One of the tents had been re-erected, and within the shadow of its rainbow silks, four other suits lounged against the bar. Not a one of them moved to help the woman.

"Hey!" Gunther shouted. He felt hideously self-conscious, as if he'd been abruptly thrust into the middle of a play without memorized lines or any idea of the plot or notion of what his role in it was. "Stop that!"

The suit turned toward him. It held the woman's slim arm captive in one gloved hand. "Go away," a male voice growled over the radio.

"What do you think you're doing? Who are you?" The man wore a Westinghouse suit, one of a dozen or so among the unafflicted. But Gunther recognized a brown, kidney-shaped scorch mark on the abdomen panel. "Posner—is that you? Let that woman go."

"She's not a woman," Posner said. "Hell, look at her—she's not even human. She's a flick."

Gunther set his helmet to record. "I'm taping this," he warned. "You hit that woman again, and Ekatarina will see it all. I promise."

Posner released the woman. She stood dazed for a second or two, and then the voice from her peecee reasserted control. She bent to pick up a broom, and returned to work.

Switching off his helmet, Gunther said, "Okay. What did she do?"

Indignantly, Posner extended a foot. He pointed sternly down at it. "She peed all over my boot!"

The suits in the tent had been watching with interest. Now they roared. "Your own fault, Will!" one of them called out. "I told you you weren't scheduling in enough time for personal hygiene."

"Don't worry about a little moisture. It'll boil off next time you hit vacuum!"

But Gunther was not listening. He stared at the flick Posner had been mistreating and wondered why he hadn't recognized Anya earlier. Her mouth was pursed, her face squinched up tight with worry, as if there were a key in the back of her head that had been wound three times too many. Her shoulders cringed forward now, too. But still.

"I'm sorry, Anya," he said. "Hiro is dead. There wasn't anything we could do."

She went on sweeping, oblivious, unhappy.

He caught the shift's last jitney back to the Center. It felt good to be home again. Miiko Ezumi had decided to loot the outlying factories of their oxygen and water surpluses, then carved a shower room from the rock. There was a long line for only three minutes' use, and no soap, but nobody complained. Some people pooled their time, showering two and three together. Those waiting their turns joked rowdily.

Gunther washed, grabbed some clean shorts and a Glavkosmos tee-shirt, and padded down the hall. He hesitated outside the common room,

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listening to the gang sitting around the table, discussing the more colorful flicks they'd encountered.

"Have you seen the Mouse Hunter?"

"Oh yeah, and Ophelia!"

"The Pope!"

"The Duck Lady!

"Everybody knows the Duck Lady!"

They were laughing and happy. A warm sense of community flowed from the room, what Gunther's father would have in his sloppy-sentimental way called *Gemutlichkeit.* Gunther stepped within.

Liza Nagenda looked up, all gums and teeth, and froze. Her jaw snapped shut. "Well, if it isn't Izmailova's personal spy!"

"What?" The accusation took Gunther's breath away. He looked helplessly about the room. Nobody would meet his eye. They had all fallen silent.

Liza's face was grey with anger. "You heard me! It was you that ratted on Krishna, wasn't it?"

"Now that's way out of line! You've got a lot of fucking gall if—" He controlled himself with an effort. There was no sense in matching her hysteria with his own. "It's none of your business what my relationship with Izmailova is or is not." He looked around the table. "Not that any of you deserve to know, but Krishna's working on a cure. If anything I said or did helped put him back in the lab, well then, so be it."

She smirked. "So what's your excuse for snitching on Will Posner?"

"I never—"

"We all heard the story! You told him you were going to run straight to your precious Izmailova with your little helmet vids."

"Now, Liza," Takayuni began. She slapped him away.

"Do you know what Posner was doing?" Gunther shook a finger in Liza's face. "Hah? Do you? He was beating a woman—Anya! He was beating Anya right out in the open!"

"So what? He's one of us, isn't he? Not a zoned-out, dead-eyed, ranting, drooling *flick!*"

"You bitch!" Outraged, Gunther lunged at Liza across the table. "I'll kill you, I swear it!" People jerked back from him, rushed forward, a chaos of motion. Posner thrust himself in Gunther's way, arms spread, jaw set and manly. Gunther punched him in the face. Posner looked surprised, and fell back. Gunther's hand stung, but he felt strangely good anyway; if everyone else was crazy, then why not him?

"You just try it!" Liza shrieked. "I knew you were that type all along!"

Takayuni grabbed Liza away one way. Hamilton seized Gunther and yanked him the other. Two of Posner's friends were holding him back as well.

"I've had about all I can take from you!" Gunther shouted. "You cheap slut!"

"Listen to him! Listen what he calls me!"

Screaming, they were shoved out opposing doors.

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"It's all right, Gunther." Beth had flung him into the first niche they'd come to. He slumped against a wall, shaking, and closed his eyes. "It's all right now."

But it wasn't. Gunther was suddenly struck with the realization that with the exception of Ekatarina he no longer had any friends. Not real friends, close friends. How could this have happened? It was as if everyone had been turned into werewolves. Those who weren't actually mad were still monsters. "I don't understand."

Hamilton sighed. "What don't you understand, Weil?"

"The way people—the way we all treat the flicks. When Posner was beating Anya, there were four other suits standing nearby, and not a one of them so much as lifted a finger to stop him. Not one! And I felt it too, there's no use pretending I'm superior to the rest of them. I wanted to walk on and pretend I hadn't seen a thing. What's happened to us?"

Hamilton shrugged. Her hair was short and dark about her plain round face. "I went to a pretty expensive school when I was a kid. One year we had one of those exercises that're supposed to be personally enriching. You know? A life experience. We were divided into two groups—Prisoners and Guards. The Prisoners couldn't leave their assigned areas without permission from a guard, the Guards got better lunches, stuff like that. Very simple set of rules. I was a Guard.

"Almost immediately, we started to bully the Prisoners. We pushed 'em around, yelled at 'em, kept 'em in line. What was amazing was that the Prisoners let us do it. They outnumbered us five to one. We didn't even have authority for the things we did. But not a one of them complained. Not a one of them stood up and said no, you can't do this. They played the game.

"At the end of the month, the project was dismantled and we had some study seminars on what we'd learned: the roots of fascism, and so on. Read some Hannah Arendt. And then it was all over. Except that my best girlfriend never spoke to me again. I couldn't blame her, either. Not after what I'd done.

"What did I really learn? That people will play whatever role you put them in. They'll do it without knowing that that's what they're doing. Take a minority, tell them they're special, and make them guards —they'll start playing Guard."

"So what's the answer? How do we keep from getting caught up in the roles we play?"

"Damned if I know, Weil. Damned if I know."

Ekatarina had moved her niche to the far end of a new tunnel. Hers was the only room the tunnel served, and consequently she had a lot of privacy. As Gunther stepped in, a staticky voice swam into focus on his trance chip. ". . . reported shock. In Cairo, government officials pledged . . ." It cut off.

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"Hey! You've restored—" He stopped. If radio reception had been restored, he'd have known. It would have been the talk of the Center. Which meant that radio contact had never really been completely broken. It was simply being controlled by the CMP.

Ekatarina looked up at him. She'd been crying, but she'd stopped. "The Swiss Orbitals are gone!" she whispered. "They hit them with everything from softbombs to brilliant pebbles. They dusted the shipyards."

The scope of all those deaths obscured what she was saying for a second. He sank down beside her. "But that means—"

"There's no spacecraft that can reach us, yes. Unless there's a ship in transit, we're stranded here."

He took her in his arms. She was cold and shivering. Her skin felt clammy and mottled with gooseflesh. "How long has it been since you've had any sleep?" he asked sharply.

"I can't—"

"You're wired, aren't you?"

"I can't afford to sleep. Not now. Later."

"Ekatarina. The energy you get from wire isn't free. It's only borrowed from your body. When you come down, it all comes due. If you wire yourself up too tightly, you'll crash yourself right into a coma."

"I haven't been—" She stalled, and a confused, uncertain look entered her eyes. "Maybe you're right. I could probably use a little rest."

The CMP came to life. "Cadre Nine is building a radio receiver. Ezumi gave them the go-ahead."

"Shit!" Ekatarina sat bolt upright. "Can we stop it?"

"Moving against a universally popular project would cost you credibility you cannot afford to lose."

"Okay, so how can we minimize the—"

"Ekatarina," Gunther said. "Sleep, remember?"

"In a sec, babe." She patted the futon. "You just lie down and wait for me. I'll have this wrapped up before you can nod off." She kissed him gently, lingeringly. "All right?"

"Yeah, sure." He lay down and closed his eyes, just for a second.

When he awoke, it was time to go on shift, and Ekatarina was gone.

It was only the fifth day since Vladivostok. But everything was so utterly changed that times before then seemed like memories of another world. In a previous life I was Gunther Weil, he thought. I lived and worked and had a few laughs. Life was pretty good then.

He was still looking for Sally Chang, though with dwindling hope. Now, whenever he talked to suits he'd ask if they needed his help. Increasingly, they did not.

The third-level chapel was a shallow bowl facing the terrace wall. Tiger lilies grew about the chancel area at the bottom, and turquoise lizards skittered over the rock. The children were playing a ball in the chancel. Gunther stood at the top, chatting with a sad-voiced Ryohei Iomato.

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The children put away the ball and began to dance. They were playing London Bridge. Gunther watched them with a smile. From above they were so many spots of color, a flower unfolding and closing in on itself. Slowly, the smile faded. They were dancing too well. Not one of the children moved out of step, lost her place, or walked away sulking. Their expressions were intense, self-absorbed, inhuman. Gunther had to turn away.

"The CMP controls them," Iomato said. "I don't have much to do, really. I go through the vids and pick out games for them to play, songs to sing, little exercises to keep them healthy. Sometimes I have them draw."

"My God, how can you stand it?"

Iomato sighed. "My old man was an alcoholic. He had a pretty rough life, and at some point he started drinking to blot out the pain. You know what?"

"It didn't work."

"Yah. Made him even more miserable. So then he had twice the reason to get drunk. He kept on trying, though, I've got to give him that. He wasn't the sort of man to give up on something he believed in just because it wasn't working the way it should."

Gunther said nothing.

"I think that memory is the only thing keeping me from just taking off my helmet and joining them."

The Corporate Video Center was a narrow run of offices in the farthest tunnel reaches, where raw footage for adverts and incidental business use was processed before being squirted to better-equipped vid centers on Earth. Gunther passed from office to office, slapping off flatscreens left flickering since the disaster.

It was unnerving going through the normally busy rooms and finding no one. The desks and cluttered work stations had been abandoned in purposeful disarray, as though their operators had merely stepped out for a break and would be back momentarily. Gunther found himself spinning around to confront his shadow, and flinching at unexpected noises. With each machine he turned off, the silence at his back grew. It was twice as lonely as being out on the surface.

He doused a last light and stepped into the gloomy hall. Two suits with interwoven H-and-A logos loomed up out of the shadows. He jumped in shock. They were empty, of course—there were no Hyundai Aerospace components among the unafflicted. Someone had simply left these suits here in temporary storage before the madness.

The suits grabbed him.

"Hey!" He shouted in terror as they seized him by the arms and lifted him off his feet. One of them hooked the peecee from his harness and snapped it off. Before he knew what was happening he'd been swept down a short flight of stairs and through a doorway.

"Mr. Weil."

He was in a high-ceilinged room carved into the rock to hold airhand-

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ling equipment that hadn't been constructed yet. A high string of temporary work lamps provided dim light. To the far side of the room a suit sat behind a desk, flanked by two more, standing. They all wore Hyundai Aerospace suits. There was no way he could identify them.

The suits that had brought him in crossed their arms.

"What's going on here?" Gunther asked. "Who are you?"

"You are the last person we'd tell that to." He couldn't tell which one had spoken. The voice came over his radio, made sexless and impersonal by an electronic filter. "Mr. Weil, you stand accused of crimes against your fellow citizens. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"What?" Gunther looked at the suits before him and to either side. They were perfectly identical, indistinguishable from each other, and he was suddenly afraid of what the poeple within might feel free to do, armored as they were in anonymity. "Listen, you've got no right to do this. There's a governmental structure in place, if you've got any complaints against me."

"Not everyone is pleased with Izmailova's government," the judge said.

"But she controls the CMP, and we could not run Bootstrap without the CMP controlling the flicks," a second added.

"We simply have to work around her." Perhaps it was the judge; perhaps it was yet another of the suits. Gunther couldn't tell.

"Do you wish to speak on your own behalf?"

"What exactly am I charged with?" Gunther asked desperately. "Okay, maybe I've done something wrong, I'll entertain that possibility. But maybe you just don't understand my situation. Have you considered that?"

Silence.

"I mean, just what are you angry about? Is it Posner? Because I'm not sorry about that. I won't apologize. You can't mistreat people just because they're sick. They're still people, like anybody else. They have their rights."

Silence.

"But if you think I'm some kind of a spy or something, that I'm running around and ratting on people to Ek—to Izmailova, well that's simply not true. I mean, I talk to her, I'm not about to pretend I don't, but I'm not her spy or anything. She doesn't have any spies. She doesn't need any! She's just trying to hold things together, that's all.

"Jesus, you don't know what she's gone through for you! You haven't seen how much it takes out of her! She'd like nothing better than to quit. But she has to hang in there because—" An eerie dark electronic gabble rose up on his radio, and he stopped as he realized that they were laughing at him.

"Does anyone else wish to speak?"

One of Gunther's abductors stepped forward. "Your honor, this man says that flicks are human. He overlooks the fact that they cannot live without our support and direction. Their continued well-being is bought

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at the price of our unceasing labor. He stands condemned out of his own mouth. I petition the court to make the punishment fit the crime."

The judge looked to the right, to the left. His two companions nodded, and stepped back into the void. The desk had been set up at the mouth of what was to be the air intake duct. Gunther had just time enough to realize this when they reappeared, leading someone in a G5 suit identical to his own.

"We could kill you, Mr. Weil," the artificial voice crackled. "But that would be wasteful. Every hand, every mind is needed. We must all pull together in our time of need."

The G5 stood alone and motionless in the center of the room.

"Watch."

Two of the Hyundai suits stepped up to the G5 suit. Four hands converged on the helmet seals. With practiced efficiency, they flicked the latches and lifted the helmet. It happened so swiftly the occupant could not have stopped it if he'd tried.

Beneath the helmet was the fearful, confused face of a flick.

"Sanity is a privilege, Mr. Weil, not a right. You are guilty as charged. However, we are not cruel men. *This once* we will let you off with a warning. But these are desperate times. At your next offense—be it only so minor a thing as reporting this encounter to the Little General—we may be forced to dispense with the formality of a hearing." The judge paused. "Do I make myself clear?"

Reluctantly, Gunther nodded.

"Then you may leave."

On the way out, one of the suits handed him back his peecee.

Five people. He was sure there weren't any more involved than that. Maybe one or two more, but that was it. Posner had to be hip-deep in this thing, he was certain of that. It shouldn't be too hard to figure out the others.

He didn't dare take the chance.

At shift's end he found Ekatarina already asleep. She looked haggard and unhealthy. He knelt by her, and gently brushed her cheek with the back of one hand.

Her eyelids fluttered open.

"Oh, hey. I didn't mean to wake you. Just go back to sleep, huh?"

She smiled. "You're sweet, Gunther, but I was only taking a nap anyway. I've got to be up in another fifteen minutes." Her eyes closed again. "You're the only one I can really trust anymore. Everybody's lying to me, feeding me misinformation, keeping silent when there's something I need to know. You're the only one I can count on to tell me things."

You have enemies, he thought. They call you the Little General, and they don't like how you run things. They're not ready to move against you directly, but they have plans. And they're ruthless.

Aloud, he said, "Go back to sleep."

"They're all against me," she murmured. "Bastard sons of bitches."

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The next day he spent going through the service spaces for the new airhandling system. He found a solitary flick's nest made of shredded vacuum suits, but after consultation with the CMP concluded that nobody had lived there for days. There was no trace of Sally Chang.

If it had been harrowing going through the sealed areas before his trial, it was far worse today. Ekatarina's enemies had infected him with fear. Reason told him they were not waiting for him, that he had nothing to worry about until he displeased them again. But the hindbrain did not listen.

Time crawled. When he finally emerged into daylight at the end of his shift, he felt light-headedly out of phase with reality from the hours of isolation. At first he noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Then his suit radio was full of voices, and people were hurrying about every which way. There was a happy buzz in the air. Somebody was singing.

He snagged a passing suit and asked, "What's going on?"

"Haven't you heard? The war is over. They've made peace. And there's a ship coming in!"

The *Lake Geneva* had maintained television silence through most of the long flight to the Moon for fear of long-range beam weapons. With peace, however, they opened direct transmission to Bootstrap.

Ezumi's people had the flicks sew together an enormous cotton square and hack away some trailing vines so they could hang it high on the shadowed side of the crater. Then, with the fill lights off, the video image was projected. Swiss spacejacks tumbled before the camera, grinning, all denim and red cowboy hats. They were talking about their escape from the hunter-seeker missiles, brash young voices running one over the other.

The top officers were assembled beneath the cotton square. Gunther recognized their suits. Ekatarina's voice boomed from newly erected loudspeakers. "When are you coming in? We have to make sure the spaceport field is clear. How many hours?"

Holding up five fingers, a blond woman said, "Forty-five!"

"No, forty-three!"

"Nothing like that!"

"*Almost* forty-five!"

Again Ekatarina's voice cut into the tumult. "What's it like in the orbitals? We heard they were destroyed."

"Yes, destroyed!"

"Very bad, very bad, it'll take years to—"

"But most of the people are—"

"We were given six orbits warning; most went down in lifting bodies, there was a big evacuation."

"Many died, though. It was very bad."

Just below the officers, a suit had been directing several flicks as they assembled a camera platform. Now it waved broadly, and the flicks

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stepped away. In the *Lake Geneva* somebody shouted, and several heads turned to stare at an offscreen television monitor. The suit turned the camera, giving them a slow, panoramic scan.

One of the spacejacks said, "What's it like there? I see that some of you are wearing space suits, and the rest are not. Why is that?"

Ekatarina took a deep breath. "There have been some changes here."

There was one hell of a party at the Center when the Swiss arrived. Sleep schedules were juggled, and save for a skeleton crew overseeing the flicks, everyone turned out to welcome the dozen newcomers to the Moon. They danced to skiffle, and drank vacuum-distilled vodka. Everyone had stories to tell, rumors to swap, opinions on the likelihood that the peace would hold.

Gunther wandered away midway through the party. The Swiss depressed him. They all seemed so young and fresh and eager. He felt battered and cynical in their presence. He wanted to grab them by the shoulders and shake them awake.

Depressed, he wandered through the locked-down laboratories. Where the Viral Computer Project had been, he saw Ekatarina and the captain of the *Lake Geneva* conferring over a stack of crated bioflops. They bent low over Ekatarina's peecee, listening to the CMP.

"Have you considered nationalizing your industries?" the captain asked. "That would give us the plant needed to build the New City. Then, with a few hardwired utilities, Bootstrap could be managed without anyone having to set foot inside it."

Gunther was too distant to hear the CMP's reaction, but he saw both women laugh. "Well," said Ekatarina. "At the very least we will have to renegotiate terms with the parent corporations. With only one ship functional, people can't be easily replaced. Physical presence has become a valuable commodity. We'd be fools not to take advantage of it."

He passed on, deeper into shadow, wandering aimlessly. Eventually, there was a light ahead, and he heard voices. One was Krishna's, but spoken faster and more forcefully than he was used to hearing it. Curious, he stopped just outside the door.

Krishna was in the center of the lab. Before him, Beth Hamilton stood nodding humbly. "Yes, sir," she said. "I'll do that. Yes." Dumbfounded, Gunther realized that Krishna was giving her orders.

Krishna glanced up. "Weil! You're just the man I was about to come looking for."

"I am?"

"Come in here, don't dawdle." Krishna smiled and beckoned, and Gunther had no choice but to obey. Krishna looked like a young god now. The force of his spirit danced in his eyes like fire. It was strange that Gunther had never noticed before how tall he was. "Tell me where Sally Chang is."

"I don't—I mean, I can't, I—" He stopped and swallowed. "I think Chang must be dead." Then, "Krishna? What's happened to you?"

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"He's finished his research," Beth said.

"I rewrote my personality from top to bottom," Krishna said. "I'm not half-crippled with shyness anymore—have you noticed?" He put a hand on Gunther's shoulder, and it was reassuring, warm, comforting. "Gunther, I won't tell you what it took to scrape together enough messenger engines from traces of old experiments to try this out on myself. But it works. We've got a treatment that among other things will serve as a universal cure for everyone in Bootstrap. But to do that, we need the messenger engines, and they're not here. Now tell me why you think Sally Chang is dead."

"Well, uh, I've been searching for her for four days. And the CMP has been looking too. You've been holed up here all the time, so maybe you don't know the flicks as well as the rest of us do. But they're not very big on planning. The likelihood one of them could actively evade detection that long is practically zilch. The only thing I can think is that somehow she made it to the surface before the effects hit her, got into a truck and told it to drive as far as her oxygen would take her."

Krishna shook his head and said, "No. It is simply not consistent with Sally Chang's character. With all the best will in the world, I cannot picture her killing herself." He slid open a drawer: row upon row of gleaming cannisters. "This may help. Do you remember when I said there were *two* cannisters of mimetic engines missing, not just the schizomimetic?"

"Vaguely."

"I've been too busy to worry about it, but wasn't that odd? Why would Chang have taken a cannister and not used it?"

"What was in the second cannister?" Hamilton asked.

"Paranoia," Krishna said. "Or rather a good enough chemical analog. Now, paranoia is a rare disability, but a fascinating one. It's characterized by an elaborate but internally consistent delusional system. The paranoid patient functions well intellectually, and is less fragmented than a schizophrenic. Her emotional and social responses are closer to normal. She's capable of concerted effort. In a time of turmoil, it's quite possible that a paranoid individual could elude our detection."

"Okay, let's get this straight," Hamilton said. "War breaks out on Earth. Chang gets her orders, keys in the software bombs, and goes to Bootstrap with a cannister full of madness and a little syringe of paranoia—no, it doesn't work. It all falls apart."

"How so?"

"Paranoia wouldn't inoculate her against schizophrenia. How does she protect herself from her own aerosols?"

Gunther stood transfixed. "Lavender!"

They caught up with Sally Chang on the topmost terrace of Bootstrap. The top level was undeveloped. Someday—so the corporate brochures promised—fallow deer would graze at the edge of limpid pools, and otters frolic in the streams. But the soil hadn't been built up yet, the worms

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brought in or the bacteria seeded. There were only sand, machines, and a few unhappy opportunistic weeds.

Chang's camp was to one side of a streamhead, beneath a fill light. She started to her feet at their approach, glanced quickly to the side and decided to brazen it out.

A sign reading EMERGENCY CANOPY MAINTENANCE STATION had been welded to a strut supporting the stream's valve stem. Under it were a short stacked pyramid of oxytanks and an aluminum storage crate the size of a coffin. "Very clever," Beth muttered over Gunther's trance chip. "She sleeps in the storage crate, and anybody stumbling across her thinks it's just spare equipment."

The lavender suit raised an arm and casually said, "Hiya, guys. How can I help you?"

Krishna strode forward and took her hands. "Sally, it's me—Krishna!"

"Oh, thank God!" She slumped in his arms. "I've been so afraid."

"You're all right now."

"I thought you were an Invader at first, when I saw you coming up. I'm so hungry—I haven't eaten since I don't know when." She clutched at the sleeve of Krishna's suit. "You do know about the Invaders, don't you?"

"Maybe you'd better bring me up to date."

They began walking toward the stairs. Krishna gestured quickly to Gunther and then toward Chang's worksuit harness. A cannister the size of a hip flask hung there. Gunther reached over and plucked it off. The messenger engines! He held them in his hand.

To the other side, Beth Hamilton plucked up the near-full cylinder of paranoia-inducing engines and made it disappear.

Sally Chang, deep in the explication of her reasonings, did not notice. ". . . obeyed my orders, of course. But they made no sense. I worried and worried about that until finally I realized what was really going on. A wolf caught in a trap will gnaw off its leg to get free. I began to look for the wolf. What kind of enemy justified such extreme actions? Certainly nothing human."

"Sally," Krishna said, "I want you to entertain the notion that the conspiracy—for want of a better word—may be more deeply rooted than you suspect. That the problem is not an external enemy, but the workings of our own brain. Specifically that the Invaders are an artifact of the psychotomimetics you injected into yourself back when this all began."

"No. No, there's too much evidence. It all fits together! The Invaders needed a way to disguise themselves both physically, which was accomplished by the vacuum suits, and psychologically, which was achieved by the general madness. Thus, they can move undetected among us. Would a human enemy have converted all of Bootstrap to slave labor? Unthinkable! They can read our minds like a book. If we hadn't protected ourselves with the schizomimetics, they'd be able to extract all our knowledge, all our military research secrets . . ."

Listening, Gunther couldn't help imagining what Liza Nagenda would

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say to all of this wild talk. At the thought of her, his jaw clenched. Just like one of Chang's machines, he realized, and couldn't help being amused at his own expense.

Ekatarina was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Her hands trembled noticeably, and there was a slight quaver in her voice when she said, "What's all this the CMP tells me about messenger engines? Krishna's supposed to have come up with a cure of some kind?"

"We've got them," Gunther said quietly, happily. He held up the cannister. "It's over now, we can heal our friends."

"Let me see," Ekatarina said. She took the cannister from his hand.

"No, wait!" Hamilton cried, too late. Behind her, Krishna was arguing with Sally Chang about her interpretations of recent happenings. Neither had noticed yet that those in front had stopped.

"Stand back." Ekatarina took two quick steps backward. Edgily, she added, "I don't mean to be difficult. But we're going to sort this all out, and until we do, I don't want anybody too close to me. That includes you too, Gunther."

Flicks began gathering. By ones and twos they wandered up the lawn, and then by the dozen. By the time it was clear that Ekatarina had called them up via the CMP, Krishna, Chang, and Hamilton were separated from her and Gunther by a wall of people.

Chang stood very still. Somewhere behind her unseen face, she was revising her theories to include this new event. Suddenly, her hands slapped at her suit, grabbing for the missing cannisters. She looked at Krishna and with a trill of horror said, "You're one of them!"

"Of course I'm not—" Krishna began. But she was turning, stumbling, fleeing back up the steps.

"Let her go," Ekatarina ordered. "We've got more serious things to talk about." Two flicks scurried up, lugging a small industrial kiln between them. They set it down, and a third plugged in an electric cable. The interior began to glow. "This cannister is all you've got, isn't it? If I were to autoclave it, there wouldn't be any hope of replacing its contents."

"Izmailova, listen," Krishna said.

"I am listening. Talk."

Krishna explained, while Izmailova listened with arms folded and shoulders tilted skeptically. When he was done, she shook her head. "It's a noble folly, but folly is all it is. You want to reshape our minds into something alien to the course of human evolution. To turn the seat of thought into a jet pilot's couch. This is your idea of a solution? Forget it. Once this particular box is opened, there'll be no putting its contents back in again. And you haven't advanced any convincing arguments for opening it."

"But the people in Bootstrap!" Gunther objected. "They—"

She cut him off. "Gunther, nobody *likes* what's happened to them. But if the rest of us must give up our humanity to pay for a speculative and

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ethically dubious rehabilitation . . . well, the price is simply too high. Mad or not, they're at least human now."

"Am I inhuman?" Krishna asked. "If you tickle me, do I not laugh?"

"You're in no position to judge. You've rewired your neurons and you're stoned on the novelty. What tests have you run on yourself? How thoroughly have you mapped out your deviations from human norms? Where are your figures?" These were purely rhetorical questions; the kind of analyses she meant took weeks to run. "Even if you check out completely human—and I don't concede you will!—who's to say what the long-range consequences are? What's to stop us from drifting, step by incremental step, into madness? Who decides what madness is? Who programs the programmers? No, this is impossible. I won't gamble with our minds." Defensively, almost angrily, she repeated, "I won't gamble with our minds."

"Ekatarina," Gunther said gently, "how long have you been up? Listen to yourself. The wire is doing your thinking for you."

She waved a hand dismissively, without responding.

"Just as a practical matter," Hamilton said, "how do you expect to run Bootstrap without it? The setup is turning us all into baby fascists. You say you're worried about madness—what will we be like a year from now?"

"The CMP assures me—"

"The CMP is only a program!" Hamilton cried. "No matter how much interactivity it has, it's not flexible. It has no hope. It cannot judge a new thing. It can only enforce old decisions, old values, old habits, old fears."

Abruptly Ekatarina snapped. "*Get out of my face!*" she screamed. "Stop it, stop it, stop it! I won't listen to any more."

"Ekatarina—" Gunther began.

But her hand had tightened on the cannister. Her knees bent as she began a slow genuflection to the kiln. Gunther could see that she had stopped listening. Drugs and responsibility had done this to her, speeding her up and bewildering her with conflicting demands, until she stood trembling on the brink of collapse. A good night's sleep might have restored her, made her capable of being reasoned with. But there was no time. Words would not stop her now. And she was too far distant for him to reach before she destroyed the engines. In that instant he felt such a strong outwelling of emotion toward her as would be impossible to describe.

"Ekatarina," he said. "I love you."

She half-turned her head toward him and in a distracted, somewhat irritated tone said, "What are you—"

He lifted the bolt gun from his work harness, leveled it, and fired.

Ekatarina's helmet shattered.

She fell.

"I should have shot to just breach the helmet. That would have stopped

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her. But I didn't think I was a good enough shot. I aimed right for the center of her head."

"Hush," Hamilton said. "You did what you had to. Stop tormenting yourself. Talk about more practical things."

He shook his head, still groggy. For the longest time, he had been kept on beta endorphins, unable to feel a thing, unable to care. It was like being swathed in cotton batting. Nothing could reach him. Nothing could hurt him. "How long have I been out of it?"

"A day."

"A day!" He looked about the austere room. Bland rock walls and laboratory equipment with smooth, noncommital surfaces. To the far end, Krishna and Chang were hunched over a swipeboard, arguing happily and impatiently overwriting each other's scrawls. A Swiss spacejack came in and spoke to their backs. Krishna nodded distractedly, not looking up. "I thought it was much longer."

"Long enough. We've already salvaged everyone connected with Sally Chang's group, and gotten a good start on the rest. Pretty soon it will be time to decide how you want yourself rewritten."

He shook his head, feeling dead. "I don't think I'll bother, Beth. I just don't have the stomach for it."

"We'll give you the stomach."

"Naw, I don't . . ." He felt a black nausea come welling up again. It was cyclic; it returned every time he was beginning to think he'd finally put it down. "I don't want the fact that I killed Ekatarina washed away in a warm flood of self-satisfaction. The idea disgusts me."

"We don't want that either." Posner led a delegation of seven into the lab. Krishna and Chang rose to face them, and the group broke into swirling halves. "There's been enough of that. It's time we all started taking responsibility for the consequences of—" Everyone was talking at once. Hamilton made a face.

"Started taking responsibility for—"

Voices rose.

"We can't talk here," she said. "Take me out on the surface."

They drove with the cabin pressurized, due west on the Seething Bay road. Ahead, the sun was almost touching the weary walls of Sommering crater. Shadow crept down from the mountains and cratertops, yearning toward the radiantly lit Sinus Medii. Gunther found it achingly beautiful. He did not want to respond to it, but the harsh lines echoed the lonely hurt within him in a way that he found oddly comforting.

Hamilton touched her peecee. *Putting on the Ritz* filled their heads.

"What if Ekatarina was right?" he said sadly. "What if we're giving up everything that makes us human? The prospect of being turned into some kind of big-domed emotionless superman doesn't appeal to me much."

Hamilton shook her head. "I asked Krishna about that, and he said No. He said it was like . . . were you ever nearsighted?"

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"Sure, as a kid."

"Then you'll understand. He said it was like the first time you came out of the doctor's office after being lased. How everything seemed clear and vivid and distinct. What had once been a blur that you called 'tree' resolved itself into a thousand individual and distinct leaves. The world was filled with unexpected detail. There were things on the horizon that you'd never seen before. Like that."

"Oh." He stared ahead. The disk of the sun was almost touching Sommering. "There's no point in going any farther."

He powered down the truck.

Beth Hamilton looked uncomfortable. She cleared her throat and with brusque energy said, "Gunther, look. I had you bring me out here for a reason. I want to propose a merger of resources."

"A what?"

"Marriage."

It took Gunther a second to absorb what she had said. "Aw, no . . . I don't . . ."

"I'm serious. Gunther, I know you think I've been hard on you, but that's only because I saw a lot of potential in you, and that you were doing nothing with it. Well, things have changed. Give me a say in your rewrite, and I'll do the same for you."

He shook his head. "This is just too weird for me."

"It's too late to use that as an excuse. Ekatarina was right—we're sitting on top of something very dangerous, the most dangerous opportunity humanity faces today. It's out of the bag, though. Word has gotten out. Earth is horrified and fascinated. They'll be watching us. Briefly, very briefly, we can control this thing. We can help to shape it now, while it's small. Five years from now, it will be out of our hands.

"You have a good mind, Gunther, and it's about to get better. I think we agree on what kind of a world we want to make. I want you on my side."

"I don't know what to say."

"You want true love? You got it. We can make the sex as sweet or nasty as you like. Nothing easier. You want me quieter, louder, gentler, more assured? We can negotiate. Let's see if we can come to terms."

He said nothing.

Hamilton eased back in the seat. After a time, she said, "You know? I've never watched a lunar sunset before. I don't get out on the surface much."

"We'll have to change that," Gunther said.

Hamilton stared hard into his face. Then she smiled. She wriggled closer to him. Clumsily, he put an arm over her shoulder. It seemed to be what was expected of him. He coughed into his hand, then pointed a finger. "There it goes."

Lunar sunset was a simple thing. The crater wall touched the bottom of the solar disk. Shadows leaped from the slopes and raced across the lowlands. Soon half the sun was gone. Smoothly, without distortion, it

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dwindled. A last brilliant sliver of light burned atop the rock, then ceased to be. In the instant before the windshield adjusted and the stars appeared, the universe filled with darkness.

The air in the cab cooled. The panels snapped and popped with the sudden shift in temperature.

Now Hamilton was nuzzling the side of his neck. Her skin was slightly tacky to the touch, and exuded a faint but distinct odor. She ran her tongue up the line of his chin and poked it in his ear. Her hand fumbled with the latches of his suit.

Gunther experienced no arousal at all, only a mild distaste that bordered on disgust. This was horrible, a defilement of all he had felt for Ekatarina.

But it was a chore he had to get through. Hamilton was right. All his life his hindbrain had been in control, driving him with emotions chemically derived and randomly applied. He had been lashed to the steed of consciousness and forced to ride it wherever it went, and that nightmare gallop had brought him only pain and confusion. Now that he had control of the reins, he could make this horse go where he wanted.

He was not sure what he would demand from his reprogramming. Contentment, perhaps. Sex and passion, almost certainly. But not love. He was done with the romantic illusion. It was time to grow up.

He squeezed Beth's shoulder. One more day, he thought, and it won't matter. I'll feel whatever is best for me to feel. Beth raised her mouth to his. Her lips parted. He could smell her breath.

They kissed.●

WHERE SCIENTISTS WRITE POETRY

Scientists do not write poetry—at least not frequently—
What they write are formulae about light,
About long lines of energy waves, about the primary
Explosion hurtling out from inside itself, pieces
Of a whole universe blown sharp from that fracted heart.
What they write are histories of entropy, energy
Spun into far-flung stars and turned finally to stones
In the dark. What they write is the spiral of life
Lifting itself from the sea and wheeling through seasons,
Arranging itself into infinite caparisons but pulsing
Always underneath with the heat from that first explosion,
Concatenation and debris of galaxies, like light squaring
Itself beyond entropy, where scientists write poetry.

—Ace G. Pilkington

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

Neo Science Fantasy

Black Sun Rising
By C.S. Friedman
DAW, $18.95

Over the past twenty years, there has been a goal little discussed in the paired subgenres of SF and fantasy. It is, as it should be, fabulous, like the search for Noah's Ark or the quest for the Grail—it's the perfect pairing *of* SF and fantasy, those two antic muses so alike, so different. There have been many attempts, of course, dating back to the 1930s and the "science fantasy" of Clark Ashton Smith and even Lovecraft and, in a completely different vein Harold Shea's syllogismobile, which took de Camp and Pratt's hero into realms of fantastic fiction by an application of science.

Marion Zimmer Bradley has made her Darkover into a planet of fantasy, and Julian May, while determinedly sticking to tried-and-true SF devices of space and time travel, produced an early Earth with the seeds of mythology and such Wagnerian characters and events that her great "Saga of Pliocene Exile" breathed fantasy.

In *Black Sun Rising*, C.S. Friedman has wrought the combination in the most complex effort yet in my reading experience. It would take several of these columns simply to do justice to Friedman's concept; a brief and probably incoherent summation must suffice. The locale is the planet Erna, a third of the way across the galaxy, colonized twelve hundred years in its past by a seed ship with coldsleep passengers from Earth.

Erna is unique in having a natural force among its properties that is called the "fae" by the human cultures that have developed. These are fantastic (word used deliberately) by our standards because of the fae, which can best be described by what it does *not* do. A character thinks of Earth: "Imagine a whole world . . . of unalterable physical laws, where the will of the living has no power over inanimate objects. A world in which the same experiment, performed at a thousand different sites by a thousand different men, would have exactly the same result each time."

In other words, the fae has made what was in the minds of humans real, just as it had already created an ecology from the minds of the lesser species that had developed there. The results are certainly *close* to "magic" as we know it, but Friedman has developed the premise with a science fictional logic that gives the novel a different flavor from high fantasy.

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There is certainly no room to even begin to describe the plot in any but rudimentary detail. Certain humans have learned more than others to "work" the fae, and there are ranks of adepts and "sorcerers." There is also the non-human rakh, a pre-sapient race forced by human influence through the fae into mature intelligence. The most malign of the humans is "the Hunter," who lives in the Forest. This is a center for the most pernicious of the dark fae, who lives off of human terror and is reputed to have existed for a millennium. But a new horror appears from beyond the human and rakh lands, which steals powers, memories and "souls" (if you will) from adepts. So the hero(ine)s (a warrior priest of a fae-born religion, a female adept whose powers have been "stolen," and her devoted disciple) must join forces with the Hunter to defeat it.

In the past, I have admired Friedman's ideas and mourned her prolixity. Here I think the latter really overbalances the former. While the plot is for the most part single-lined and follows closely her small cast of major characters, the complexities and ramifications of her fae-built world and culture left me often at sea.

A note should be added for Michael Whelan's magnificent cover painting, one of the best of that best of artists' work ever.

Out Of Africa

The Empire of Fear
By Brian Stableford

Caroll & Graf, $20.95

Brian Stableford's *The Empire of Fear* has as a subtitle "An Epic Vampire Novel." A vampire novel it certainly is, but I'm still never quite sure what the word "epic" encompasses though I happen to have written a book titled just that. Stableford's novel certainly covers a lot of ground (literally—Europe, Africa, and Atlantis, i.e., America), and a fair amount of time—the most part of a human's lifespan (I make that distinction by using the word "human" since there are any number of more or less immortal vampire characters). There is also a cast of thousands, but most of them are spear carriers, and the central characters are comparatively few. I guess that's why I'm hedging—for me, epic implies multiple characters, preferably generations of them.

This is really quibbling though, and unfair to Mr. Stableford, who may or may not have written an epic, but has certainly written a good solid novel that you can sink your teeth into.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry—it just came over me. I couldn't resist.

That was unfair also, because it is indeed a serious novel, with a brave attempt at creating both a scientifically valid case for vampirism and a fascinating alternate world.

The novel opens in 1623. Europe is ruled by an elite of vampires and divided into two empires, Gaul and Wallachia. Vampirism has been brought into Europe by Attila, who is still alive, as is Charlemagne, Richard Coeur de Lion and Vlad, the impaler.

The Church is a tool of the vampires, though it is thought by many mortals that vampirism is a creation of the devil; the Church pro-

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motes the view that vampires were created by God to rule and order mankind. Vampirism is not tolerated in the Islamic kingdoms; its position in subSaharan Africa is a mystery, and there are persistent rumors of another continent, perhaps the fabled Atlantis, across the sea. The creation of the (almost) immortal vampire elite is a mystery; it is known that there is a sexual connection, however, and that there are many more vampire females than males.

The hero, one Noell Cordery, is the son of an English scientist, an expert in lensmaking who is convinced that vampirism is a natural process, perhaps caused by the small animicules just being discovered in blood and other liquids. He attempts to set loose a plague that supposedly has killed both vampires and humans in Africa, but it only succeeds in killing humans.

Nevertheless, Noell treks to Africa with a varied group of others, since he is convinced that despite the Attila connection, the vampire strain originated there.

The central section of the book is devoted to this epic—yes, epic—trek, and will appeal more to lovers of pre-twentieth century travel memoirs than fantasy aficionados, since it's a very realistic depiction of what such a journey must have been like. At the end of the trip is indeed a secret kingdom (there's no escaping a comparison to the Kôr of *She)*, and, after much time and hardship, a revelation.

Noell returns to Europe with the secret of vampirism (which is indeed physical in nature and bears no little resemblance to AIDS), and sets loose a series of wars of vampires of what might be called the *ancien régime* against the neovampires created by Noell, which ends in a whopping battle with Richard and Vlad and their armies on one side, and Noell and the Knights of Malta on the other. There is a dénouement in our century.

Epic or not, it's an engrossing novel for the most part. Despite being a great Stanley and Livingston fan, I could perhaps have used a little less beating my way through the bush in the central section, and one never really warms up to the central characters or their cause, perhaps because Stableford never really convinces one of the total maleficence of the vampire empire, despite the title.

Neanderthal & Juliet

Iceman
By Cynthia Felice
Ace, $3.99 (paper)

In Cynthia Felice's *Iceman,* humanity has returned from the stars to moribund Earth, which is in the throes of a new ice age. The indigenous inhabitants, while still human (in fact, rather fine specimens because of the vicissitudes of life) are called "Icemen" or, even worse, "Neanderthals," by the starfarers. There is much prejudice; the starborne have built fine floating cities (antigrav) under which live the Earthlings in poverty.

Felice has written a novel of intrigue and a love story, a curious combination for SF (which is particularly short on love stories, which, of course, are not masculine, proof that sexism is still a factor in the field). Michael Jivar is the first iceman to make it into the

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elite "Corps of Means." The Lady Jacinta Reyna, starborne of the highest degree, is the first of her society to do so also; she has the talent (the Corps of Means are the starfaring navigators and must be jacked into the drive system). Women of her culture are usually kept in a sort of purdah which makes the Islamic equivalent look like a giddy round of merrymaking. But the starfarers have established a pretense of democracy on Earth and Jacinta's uncle sees her as a tool to power, first by allowing her to join the Corps (where she spends most of her time alone in her quarters). Then, when she and Michael are involved in a shipwreck and Michael saves her from rogue icemen, her uncle sees even more power (i.e., Earth votes) in marrying her off to an iceman (a heroic one, of course). Michael is involved in a conspiracy to bring true democracy to Earth; Jacinta is good-hearted but must, of course, unlearn her aristocratic ways. The attempts of the two of them to accommodate (and eventually, of course, fall for each other) plus the intrigue of bringing down (literally and figuratively) Jacinta's uncle make for a fast and engaging story, and, in an odd way, a rather touching one.

A Spirit of Benevolence

Flying In Place
By Susan Palwick
Tor, $16.95

Susan Palwick has written short-form fantasy and SF, but she has chosen to make her novelistic debut with a ghost story. I use that old-fashioned term advisedly; today it has become too much synonymous with horror fiction adrip with gore and grue, which *Flying In Place* is anything but. Let us call it a supernatural fantasy, and note that the horror content comes not from the supernatural factor, but from the "natural" elements. The ghost is, to say the least, benign.

It is the dead sister of the story's narrator, thirteen-year-old Emma. Ginny had died at age twelve while Emma was in the womb, and has been held up to the plump, plain younger girl as a model of beauty and virtue. This by her mother, who is also her teacher at their small town school. (Anyone who has been in this position knows how horrendous that can be.)

This is far from the worst of Emma's problems, however. She is being sexually abused by her father. The entrance of Ginny onto the scene eventually resolves this horror. This is a beautifully written short novel that has the satisfying form of a young adult book with a most adult theme.

Great Novel, Great Production

The Face In the Abyss
By A. Merritt
Donald M. Grant, Hampton Falls, NH 03844, $30

Regular readers will remember that I went into uncharacteristic paroxysms of joy some months ago over the reprint of an A. Merritt novel, since that classic author's work has been unavailable *in toto* for years now. Now another one comes, and not only is it available, it is done in such a package as to make any nostalgic bibliophile weep with joy. As I noted before, there is as much hope of my being

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objective about a Merritt novel as there is about my being so *re* my late dog, so don't expect a critique here. *The Face In the Abyss* is one of Merritt's science fantasies (see above); a lost race in an obscure corner of the world using superscientific forces which they have forgotten how to control. Here the explorer Graydon finds such in the depths of the Andes, the survivors of Yu-Atlanchi, ruled by the alien Snake Mother, the last of her kind, who is pitted against the darker elements of the culture. Merritt anticipates genetic manipulation with some of the exotic races of Yu-Atlanchi (the spider people, for instance), and total sensory recreational input, but this "superscience" is couched in sensuous, poetic prose of the most colorful variety. "Purple" cry the literati. "Gorgeous!" cry the true romantics.

However, this edition is a prize beyond that. Again, a few months ago, I noted that Merritt and the classic fantasy artist, Virgil Finlay, were one of those extraordinary pairs who complemented each other like yin and yang. This new edition is illustrated by Ned Dameron, and instead of screaming heresy, I can't be too enthusiastic. It's a totally different approach from that of Finlay—the current "magic realism" that is almost cinematic, but with what superb verismo has Dameron pictured Merritt's fantasies. The very first double-page color plate (of many) is of the decadent leader of the dissident Yu-Atlanceans hunting a spider man with dinosaurs as horses and hounds. "Yes," I said. "That was the way it really looked."

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc.... An immensely appealing anthology for very low key reasons is *Once Upon A Time* edited by Lester del Rey and Risa Kessler. It's subtitled "A Treasury of Modern Fairy Tales" and that's exactly what it is. The distinguished lineup of authors is Isaac Asimov, Terry Brooks, C. J. Cherryh, Lester del Rey, Susan Dexter, Wayland Drew, Barbara Hambly, Katherine Kurtz, Anne McCaffrey, and Lawrence Watt-Evans. Each has delivered as classic a "fairy tale" as possible, and the collection is further enhanced by color illustrations by Michael Pangrazio and has a seductive cover showing a Kevin Costner type telling a tale over a camp fire on a beach against a glorious Maxfield Parrish sunset (Del Rey, $25).... For all those alternate universe fans out there (and the way the universe is going, their numbers must surely be increasing), the third in the "What Might Have Been" series of anthologies, this one being *Alternate Wars* edited by Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg, with stories by Benford, F. M. Busby, Barry Malzberg, George Zebrowski, and The Right Honorable Winston S. Churchill, M. P. (honestly!) (Bantam, $4.99, paper).... *The Crafters*, edited by Christopher Stasheff and Bill Fawcett, is a new idea in theme anthologies. This one is not about a place, but a family, and the stories are by Stasheff, Katherine Kurtz, Ru Emerson and other distinguished fantasists (Ace, $4.50, paper).... An equine of a different color is *Horse Fantastic*, a collection of stories about guess what,

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edited by Martin H. & Rosalind M. Greenberg. Contributors here include Anne McCaffrey (why doesn't that surprise me?), Mercedes Lackey (ditto), Mike Resnick, and other equestrian literati (DAW, $4.50, paper).

An anthology with a theme so obvious it had to be done eventually has been done; it's *Grand Masters' Choice*, edited by Andre Norton. The Science Fiction Writers of America have chosen over the years a series of authors to be designated Grand Masters, and here eight of them present the stories they feel are their best. The authors (and a grand lot they are) are Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, Fritz Leiber, Clifford Simak, Arthur Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton, and Jack Williamson (Tor, $3.99, paper).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot. . . . *The Emperor of Everything* is Book II of Ray Aldridge's "Emancipator" series, the first of which was the highly engaging *The Pharaoh Contract* (Bantam, $4.50, paper).

Reprints etc. . . . The first book by the author that everybody is (or should be) talking about, Dan Simmons, has been republished, so here's your chance if you missed it first time 'round. It's *Song of Kali* (Tor, $4.99, paper). . . . And a grand old not-quite-classic, Harry Harrison's *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!*, has been republished yet again (Tor, $3.99, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Complete Stories: Vol. 2* by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, $12, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 Rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With Easter being late, it's the central weekend of the Spring con(vention) season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. If calling (early evening's good) say why you're calling right off. Look for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge.

APRIL 1992

10-12—**TechniCon.** For info, write: **Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063.** Or phone: **(703) 953-1214** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Blacksburg VA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Donaldson Brown Center on the Virginia Tech campus. Fan Guest of Honor will be Colby Perkins.

10-12—**FILKONtario.** Holiday Inn, Mississauga ON. SF folksinging. Tom Smith, John Hall, C. Flynt.

10-12—**Festival of Dancing Lights. (4930) 855-1218.** Berlin, Germany. "Beauty and the Beast" con.

17-19—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Biggest con in the East.

17-19—**MiniCon, Box 8297, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408.** L. M. Bujold. Heavy on tradition.

17-19—**UK National Con, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK.** Blackpool UK. Ryman, P. McAuley.

17-19—**Australian National Con, Box 429, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia.** M. Whelan, N. Stathopoulos.

17-19—**AbbyCon, Box 74013, Market Rd., Auckland 5, New Zealand.** Guest of Honor: Terry Pratchett.

17-19—**ClueFest. (214) 596-8115.** Radisson, Dallas TX. Murder-mystery weekend, with dealers, etc.

24-26—**FreuCon, c/o Frick, Postfach 301, Freudenstadt D-7290, Germany.** Spinrad, I. Banks, Walther.

24-26—**Nebula Weekend, Box 148, Clarkston GA 30021.** Atlanta GA. SFWA annual awards presentation.

24-26—**Fantasy Arts Con, Box 8602, Boise ID 83702. (208) 454-2835.** No more info at press time.

24-26—**AmigoCon, Box 3177, El Paso TX 79923. (915) 593-1848.** No more news here at press, either.

MAY 1992

1-3—**DeepSouthCon, 1579-F Monroe Dr. 218, Atlanta GA 30324.** Lansdale, A. Clark, C. Grant, Teague.

1-3—**NameThatCon, Box 575, St. Charles MO 63302. (314) 946-9147.** St. Louis MO. Lackey, Paul Daly.

1-3—**AngliCon, Box 75536, Seattle WA 98125. (206) 745-2700.** British fantasy media: Dr. Who, etc.

8-10—**MisCon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 728-9423.** Cherryh, Cherry. Don't confuse with . . .

8-10—**MissCon, Box 13626, Jackson MS 39236. (601) 373-6335.** Hanson-Roberts, Jackson, Scott.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $110 to 7/15.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. #1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** San Francisco.

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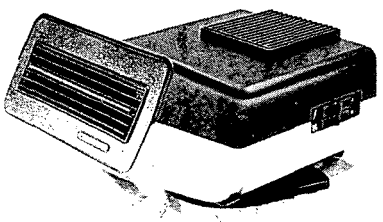

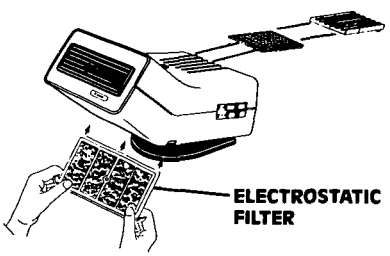

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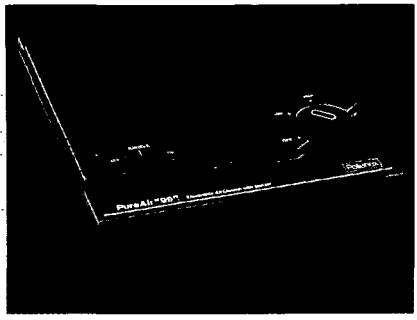
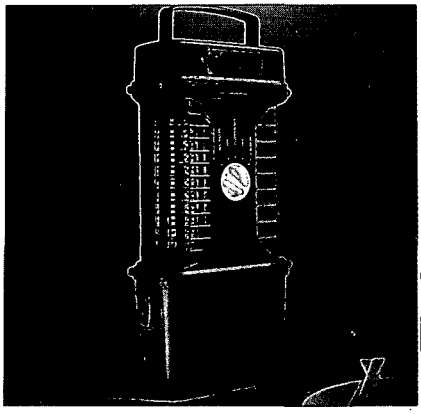
▼ FRESH AIR



Concern about air pollution is on the rise. The Pollenex® Pure Air "99" Air Cleaner with Ionizer will help clear the air around you. A high voltage generator produces negative ions that help reduce minute particles of dust, tobacco smoke and other airborne pollutants. An electrostatic air filter intercepts larger airborne particles and has a deodorizing action too. Two speed air flow control. So now you can breathe easier with Pure Air "99". **$69.98** ($7.50) #A1962; 2 for **$125.98** ($10.00) #1962/2

► D-BUG LIGHT



Don't let flying pests spoil your next outdoor activity. Just bring along the D-Bug Light, electronic bug killer lantern. More than just a great bug zapper, this unit combines the zapper with a fluorescent lantern and a safety blinker. Portable and easy to carry with its own handle, the D-Bug Light is made of high impact durable plastic. Uses two 6 volt batteries (not inc.) 12 volt DC receptacle adapts to car, RV or boat battery, so its great for camping, boating, picnics, backyards. So don't let bugs spoil your outdoor fun—just "de-bug"! **$59.98** ($5.00) #A1964.

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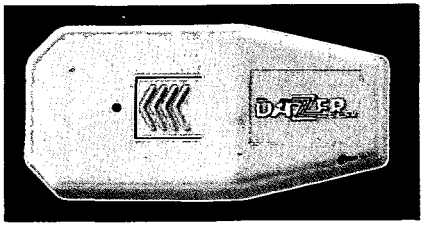

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